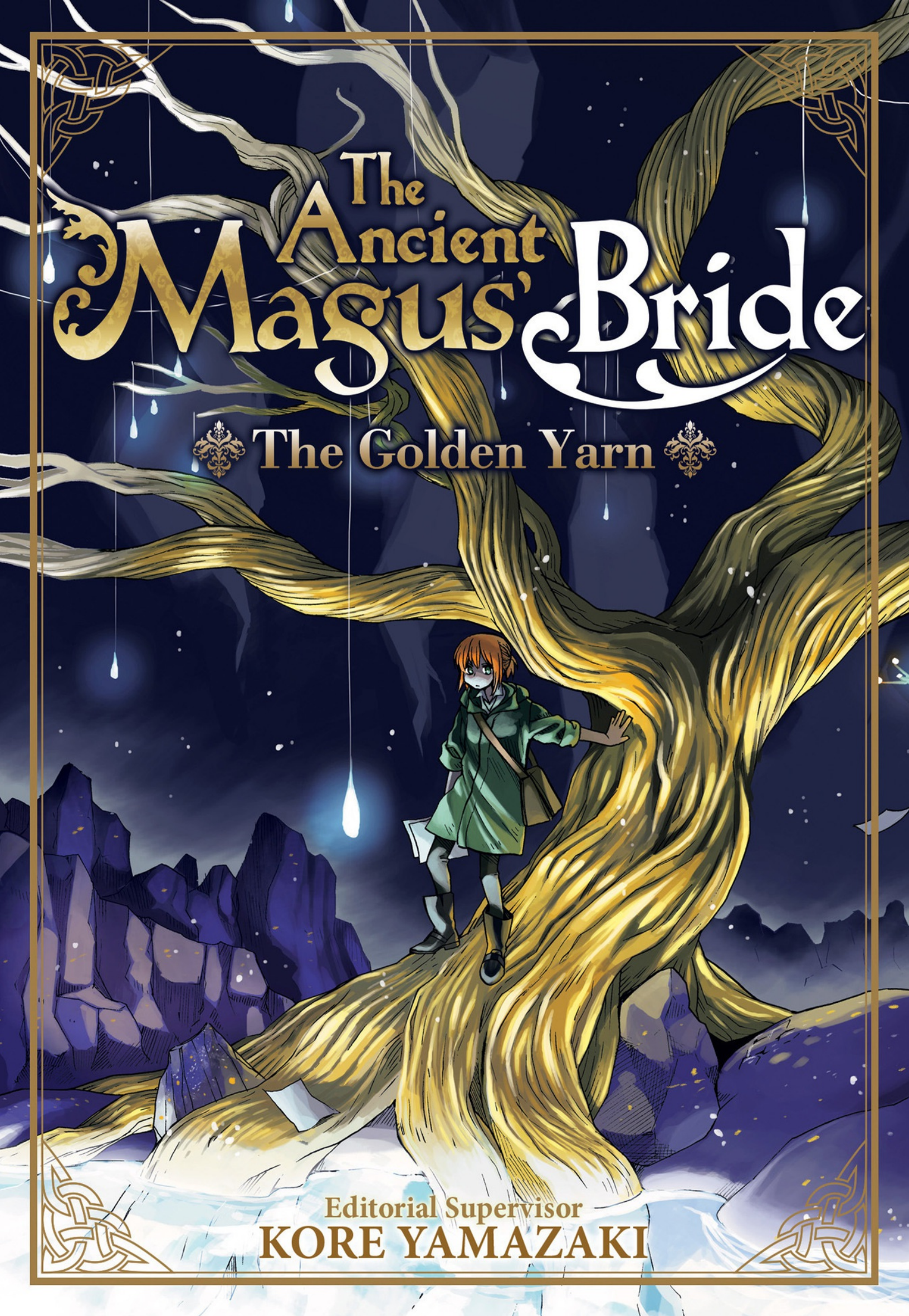




The Ancient Magus' Bride

❖ The Golden Yarn ❖

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KORE YAMAZAKI

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THE ANCIENT MAGUS' BRIDE: THE GOLDEN YARN

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Originally published in Japan in 2017 by MAG Garden Corporation,
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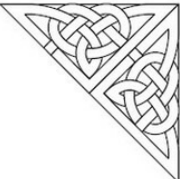
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-626929-75-3

Printed in Canada

First Printing: December 2018

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Frozen Flowers

Kore Yamazaki

Hazel left the two young women mulling over gifts for their loved ones and realized he would be done with work before sunset.

The bag fashioned from his ancestor's leather was empty, no longer weighing him down. The town gleamed with Christmas decorations, and Hazel felt light of foot.

He felt almost human. He couldn't help but smile.

He snorted, breaking into a trot. To Hazel, the rhythm of his four hooves was like a song, but only other centaurs would understand. Anyone else would just call it a racket.

Hazel broke into a gallop but halted a moment later.

Some shadowy, messy thing had just crossed the path ahead of him.

"Oh. Mm. Yeah..."

It was muttering to itself, bumping into the half-seen humans on the other side of the veil as it dragged itself along. Those it bumped did not appear to notice, but watching it writhe through the streets was deeply unpleasant. Just the thought of touching it unsettled Hazel.

Yet Hazel raised his cap as it passed. Even this thing might one day become a customer.

Many creatures such as this existed in big cities. Hazel wasn't sure if they were ghosts or living beings. Cities messed with the winds. Now, as in the past, wherever people gathered, so too did these apparitions.

London was crowded with buildings, cars, and people. Parts of it smelled genuinely terrible. There were large parks and little gardens, but it wasn't exactly easy for someone of Hazel's size to run around. While he *was* wearing horseshoes, the asphalt was still bad for his hooves. He had to maintain constant vigilance as he ran in order to avoid hitting something. If he tripped, or tripped up someone else, he would bring shame to his species.

That said, unlike the "surface" roads the humans used, creatures such as

Hazel used the “back” roads that lay reflected in pools of rainwater. This allowed them some freedom of movement.

The writhing shadow became lost in the crowd, out of sight.

Hazel put his hat back on. He made certain the string was secured under his chin and broke into a gentle trot.

The silent winter wind felt amazing, and Hazel breathed deeply. The wind carried the smell of winter, subtly distinct from that of the city itself. Inhaling it, he left London behind, following a hidden path. Making good use of a shortcut, his pace grew steadily faster.

As he ran farther and farther north, the sights before his eyes gradually began to change. The rowan fruit appeared to slumber, while the fields of grass maintained a frosty silence. Even the ancient stones that lined these country roads spoke not a word.

Hazel ran until the sun sank below the horizon and at last arrived at a house.

It appeared to be a normal home, no different from any other found this deep in the country. Its dark walls were made of gray stone. Firelight flickered through the windows. The thorny leaves of the holly growing over it were full of life, but the garden’s roses, trimmed for winter, lay slumbering in anticipation of far-off spring. Only the green apple tree growing by the door greeted Hazel warmly.

Somehow, this tree bore fruit year-round. Hazel took one.

The tree released the apple into his palm without resistance.

These were tart apples, well suited to baking. As he was about to take a bite, the door suddenly opened.

“Hazel! I told you to call out the moment you arrive!”

It was a woman with hair so black it was almost blue. A quilt covered her shoulders in place of a shawl.

With the warm light of home at her back, she shook with anger, as if she were scolding a wayward child.

“It’s been a while, Aunt Marie.”

Hazel put the unbitten green apple in his pocket and tapped his hooves in greeting.

Hazel's two-legged aunt Marie lived far from northern Britain, where the centaur herd roamed. While most centaurs had four legs, every so often one would be born with two, like a *homo sapiens*. Born without a horse's body, they were weak compared to an ordinary four-legged centaur. While centaur children could stand moments after birth, two-legged children took months before they could eat and move about on their own.

But two-legged centaurs could do more with their hands and were far more sensitive to problems of the heart.

Life with the centaur herd was difficult for them as they were better suited to living among the *homo sapiens*—among humans.

For this reason, two-legged children were sent to live with humans who knew about these things or with two-legged centaurs already dwelling in human society. This was considered beneficial for all involved.

Marie, too, had been sent to live with two-legged friends and raised as a human.

And now she lived alone in the country, far from any town.

"You don't need to come see me just because it's Christmas," Marie said.

"Did you have plans with someone else?"

"You know I don't."

Marie held open the mint green door, letting Hazel in.

The floor of Marie's place had no carpets or hardwood floors, just old stones. Hazel liked this floor. He could tread on it with his hooves without fear of harm. He'd never ventured upstairs and so was unsure what the floors up there were like.

"If I don't eat your cooking and apple pie today, Aunt Marie, I'll feel like the year just hasn't ended properly," Hazel said.

"That sounds awfully nice, but I bet you're just tired."

“If I was tired, I’d hardly come all the way out here.”

Hazel meant it. If he was worn out, he’d never go anywhere but his usual resting place.

“Ah, come on. Wipe off those feet. You were running around all day, right?”

Marie took a large cloth from the shelf by the door. She started to give it to Hazel but then thought better of it and knelt at his feet. She held out her hand, and Hazel lifted his front leg for her.

“Sorry.”

He’d have preferred to wipe them down himself, but the way his body was put together meant his forelimbs—which resembled human arms—could not reach either pair of feet.

“You’ve always just stomped right in! You should take more care.”

“I always clean up anything I get dirty!”

“Quickly sweeping pebbles into the corners does not count as cleaning.” Marie sighed dramatically, but she wasn’t angry with him. Hazel had been visiting his aunt since he was very young, and they were always like this. He used to run around the house like a wild thing, and he remembered her taking a whip to his hindquarters.

Once all his hooves were wiped down, she allowed Hazel into the living room at last.

The television in the corner was switched off, and an antique radio purchased God-knows-when stubbornly refused to play a single Christmas song. This was a Christmas living room without the voices of newscasters, the phony acting of some third-rate TV special, or the singing of carolers. Just the snap of wood burning in the fireplace and the sound of the wind racing over the winter pasture. But to Hazel, this quiet was far more comforting.

The furniture included a couch that seated three and an easy chair for one. A bookmarked novel lay on the easy chair. Marie must have been reading when Hazel arrived.

He glanced around and realized Marie had not followed him into the living

room.

He smelled ash in the fireplace and the fragrance of flowers. Alongside these, a sweet scent drifted in from the kitchen.

Hazel sniffed and followed the scent, discovering Marie boiling water to make tea.

“Any requests?” she asked, mulling over a selection of tea bags.

“Anything is fine.”

“Right.” Marie plucked two tea bags out of the box—judging by how few remained, they must have been her favorite. She dropped them into a pair of mugs just as the water came to a boil. She poured it and watched the tea steep. Hazel looked over the surprising amount of food spread out around the mugs on the oak dining table. The plates were all wrapped in aluminum foil to keep the food warm.

He peeled back foil to find potatoes roasted in rosemary and a large chicken.

“And here I was, about to starting eating alone,” Marie said, making a show of dismay.

Hazel laughed.

“There you go again. You knew I was coming, didn’t you? I’ve been here every year for a decade.”

He took the foil off another dish, eyes sparkling. He’d found the pie, bursting with thick-cut apple slices. There was a small piece missing—had she sampled it earlier? Hazel plucked an apple slice and popped it into his mouth.

“Mmm! Your pies are the absolute best.”

“No spoiling your dinner!” Marie ordered.

“Okay,” Hazel said, like a chagrined child.

“Here. Your present.”

There was still plenty of chicken left—which would likely become part of a soup tomorrow—but both had clearly eaten their fill. Finishing another cup of tea, Hazel pulled out the last item in his bag and offered it to Marie.

Marie blinked at him and then broke into a smile.

“Thank you! The only people who ever bring me presents are my brother and you. I think he’s the one who gave me that apple tree when I first started living on my own.”

She closed her eyes at the memory. Hazel tried to place the present in her hand, but she stopped him.

Marie got up and left the kitchen. A few minutes later, she returned with a box wrapped in a mint green ribbon, the same color as the door.

“Here! We’ll trade.”

She seemed so happy that Hazel couldn’t help but smile.

They both unwrapped their presents carefully, and as one, raised voices in surprise. The presents that emerged from the box and the parcel were both the same shape.

“A horseshoe?” Marie cried.

Both presents were the U-shaped metal commonly attached to a horse’s hooves.

Marie’s was old and a little rusted, while the ones Hazel held were brand new and without a scratch. Four of them, one for each hoof. Metal but not iron. The color of the stars, they appeared to be made of aluminum.

“Is this some sort of joke?” she asked.

For a four-legged centaur to give horseshoes to a two-legged one was generally seen as a mark of spite. Two-legged centaurs may have been human in form, but their minds, bodies, and insides were all centaur. Yet two-legged centaurs had no hooves upon which to place horseshoes.

Hazel frowned in puzzlement. It took him a moment to understand, and then he winced.

“Um, oh. Sorry... That’s not what I meant at all, Aunt Marie. Honestly. I heard the humans talking, and they said it was good luck to hang up a horseshoe.”

“Oh...yes. I’ve heard the same thing.”

Marie's expression relaxed, and Hazel felt relieved. He'd hunched over, but now his posture returned to normal.

"Aunt Marie, why horseshoes for me?"

"You haven't changed those in ages, have you? I wipe your feet for you often enough to notice that much."

But they were light, and sturdy, and lasted a long time!

He smiled awkwardly, scratching his head. He was happy but a little embarrassed. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling.

"Now, let's clean up. Would you mind doing the dishes?"

"It's the least I could do."

Hazel bowed and headed for the sink, which was always spic and span. Marie kept everything spotlessly clean.

But Marie didn't follow him.

There was a rustle of cloth and then the sound of something hitting the floor. Hazel turned to find Marie collapsed, clutching her chair.

"Marie?"

Hazel managed to turn himself around in the narrow space and rush over to her. He bent his front legs and helped her up.

A moment before she had seemed totally healthy. Now her brow was creased, her eyes unfocused. She seemed to be having trouble breathing.

"Marie, what's wrong? Can you walk?"

She shook her head weakly. Hazel gathered her in his arms and stood. He moved from the kitchen to the hall. Not exactly smoothly—he banged his head and rump on several things—but he managed to hurry into the living room and lower her onto the couch.

Hazel touched his palm to Marie's forehead. She didn't seem to be running a fever, but four and two-legged centaurs had different normal body temperatures. Hazel couldn't be sure she wasn't ill.

"If you're sick, why weren't you in bed?"

"I didn't notice," she whispered.

"How could you—" Hazel started and then stopped talking.

Too much food to eat alone.

She had a Christmas present ready.

He couldn't very well say any more.

Hazel returned to the kitchen and searched the cupboards. Unable to find what he was looking for, he was forced to go back to the living room and ask.

"Marie, where's your medicine?"

"I'm out," she groaned. Her hands clutched the quilt around her shoulders.

Two-legged centaurs might look human, but physically, they were centaurs. Human medicine wasn't bad for them but neither was it terribly effective. Injuries and sickness were best treated with centaur medicine. There were dozens of centaur medicines, but not all centaurs could make them. Her stock had run out.

Hazel asked how long ago she'd run out, but Marie said nothing and avoided his eyes.

"Marie, why didn't you say? I'd have happily gotten some for you."

"If they find out you're seeing a two-leg, they'll treat you differently."

"They won't!" he cried.

"Not just you. Your mother and father. My brother. His wife."

At the mention of his family, Hazel fell silent.

Four-legged centaurs looked down on two-legged ones. If not with scorn, at least with pity. If centaurs had four legs, they could be with their families, could live together, could run with the herd. But if a centaur was unable to hunt for the rest of the herd, it didn't matter how good they were with their hands. Besides, life expectancy for two-legged centaurs was decades shorter. They were prone to sickness and could not have children.

So they were treated like wounds, like growths, like pestilence. Sent to human towns so the four-legged could avoid contact with them.

Hazel had known Marie since he was young. His father—Marie’s brother—had sent his son in his stead, to make sure his sister was doing all right on her own.

Hazel had been sent away from the herd and given a letter whose contents he did not know. He’d been told it was for travel practice.

He had found fae and spirits playing here and there, and asked them the way, eventually finding his way to Marie’s house. The apple tree was already growing by the door, and covered in fruit, but all Hazel remembered was the sight of her tears as she read the letter.

Nobody knew when the rift between two and four-legged centaurs began. Hazel didn’t really understand it himself. But it had carved a deep gulf between his father and his aunt, and they weren’t the only ones.

Hazel had heard that in the old days, two-legged centaurs were killed at birth. The modern way was certainly not as bad, but it was still, to his mind, a load of crap.

To hell with it.

“I’ll go get medicine. You rest here, Marie.”

Hazel put on his coat as Marie watched in surprise.

“You’ll go get it? All the way to the herd up north?”

There was always a medicine maker in the centaur herd, just as there was always a doctor where humans gathered. If Hazel insisted the medicine was for him, perhaps there would be no repercussions.

“Even on the back roads, it will take at least two days to get there and return.”

“I can manage,” Hazel said.

“I’ll get better with rest! You should rest, too.”

“But—”

“I insist.”

Her pale hands, so frail compared to his own, grabbed him. There was no

power in them. She could hardly stop him from going, but stop him she did.

“If I don’t have medicine, I go to bed until I get better. I always have!”

This wasn’t the first time this had happened to her.

Marie’s breathing was shallow. It was less ragged than before, but her breaths still came quickly.

Hazel imagined her enduring her illness alone. All alone in bed, clutching her aching body as the wind raged across the fields. Waiting for the storm to pass, unable to rely on anyone.

“Don’t leave me alone. Not right now,” Marie said.

All Hazel could do was nod.

He went upstairs for the first time, fetching a blanket from her bed and covering her where she lay on the couch. She was always scolding him for being careless, or thoughtless, so this was him trying to be the opposite. But instead of scolding him, her eyes were closed. She did not even manage a smile.

He considered carrying her to her bed, but the narrow stairs made it difficult for him to climb. Instead, he left Marie lying in the living room. He poured hot water into a pot, which he placed on the coffee table. Folding his legs, he lay down beside her.

The fire’s heat warmed the stone floor. Hopefully that would be enough to keep Hazel from getting sick himself.

He heard her softly whisper, “Thank you.”

She always smelled like frozen flowers.

Hazel thought that every time he came to see her.

Perhaps because she’d seemed so astonishingly beautiful when, as an exhausted foal, he’d finally stumbled to her doorstep. Perhaps it was because he’d been touched by her care, her refusal to reject him, even as he became well aware of the rift between the two types of centaur.

Maybe she’d rather no four-leg ever saw her.

Yet she always prepared dinner and dessert for him, and always waited for his

arrival.

She must never know I'm secretly thrilled to have a chance to look after her.

Hazel shook off the thought. Marie's eyes fluttered open. She reached down to stroke Hazel's horseback.

His coat was black and glistened like he'd just come in from the rain. Her touch was gentle. His body temperature was higher than hers, and she could feel his warmth through her hand.

"Your coat is so black and glossy. It's beautiful."

"The same as your hair, Aunt Marie." Hazel meant it.

"Oh, that's not true. Mine's all...this way and that way. It never lies straight like yours."

"My tail gets every bit as bad if I don't comb it."

Marie chuckled. She must have imagined him trying, and Hazel laughed at the thought.

"I'm jealous of you," she said.

"Mmm?"

"I may look human, but my legs ache for it. On days when the breeze is gentle, on those rare clear days when I see a beautiful morning mist, I want to run as far as I can. But I'm so weak. Two frail legs won't take me anywhere."

That was worse than being cut off from the herd.

Marie's nails dug into his coat a little, but Hazel did not object. After a few minutes, she smoothed his coat out again, brushing where she'd mussed it.

"Nothing worse than wishing for what you can't have," she said ruefully.

Four legs or two, each had what they had. Hazel could not live in these cramped houses, and Marie could not live in the fields with the herd. Were it not for the rift, Marie's skilled hands could have made her a good doctor. Hazel could have thought of Marie as nothing more than an aunt, as part of his extended family.

"But all I've ever known is this Marie, who walks on two legs," Hazel said.

“Just as I’ve only known you to clop around on four hooves,” Marie whispered softly, closing her eyes. “The beautiful hair on your legs may be the same color as my own, but I envy them.”

Marie said nothing more. She must have fallen asleep again.

When he could tell that she was sound asleep, Hazel got up and put more wood on the fire. Excited for the new fuel, the fire sent up a shower of sparks. The red glow lit and warmed Hazel and Marie. The scent of ash grew stronger.

The night wind brought new snow dancing around the sides of the house.

The water in the pot grew cold, but Hazel did not feel like warming a new batch.

Hazel returned to Marie’s side, resting his torso on her legs. He positioned his rump where she could easily stroke it if she woke again.

The firelight made it hard for Hazel to gauge her complexion. He took off his gloves and lightly touched her cheek, which seemed a little cold.

Her breathing was steady, and the furrow between her brows had relaxed. Hazel almost spoke...but didn’t.

You’re beautiful, two legs and all.

It hurts that our eyes only meet if I bend my knees.

What would she say to him in return?

He swallowed those words, burying them in his heart till death. He adjusted the cushions, propped himself up, and closed his eyes.

When the morning light woke her, Marie could tell the storm inside her had passed.

She searched for her nephew, who’d been lying at her feet when she went to sleep. Other than some cushions on the floor, though, there was no sign of him.

Did he go home?

He was not the sort to just leave without a word. But if he had gone, she must have placed an awful burden on him. Marie’s heart filled with regret.

She’d hoped to keep her frailty hidden from him, but this had been worse

than usual. Hazel must have been so shocked. She'd never said a word about her sickness to him before.

The lack of medicine was unfortunate, as well. Perhaps it was far past time to trouble her brother for more. She would normally never consider it. Marie let out a long sigh.

Her brother sent batches of medicine regularly. Not a lot, but that was all the love he could show her. She'd been sent away as a baby, so she didn't know what her mother, father, or brother looked like. She could never ask for anything from her parents, but her brother had figured out where she was and had found a way to show her some small mercy despite the rift between their kinds.

Sometimes, that filled her with unspeakable rage. But then she'd look at the apple tree he'd sent her, and the churning fog in her heart would subside. There was nothing Marie could do about it.

Looking at her adoring nephew, she felt the same rage sometimes. But when she watched him savor the sweets she'd made, she couldn't help but laugh, and the storm inside her would die down.

Did he really leave?

"Auntie? Marie? You awake?"

Marie jumped and turned toward the hall. Hazel stood there with a steaming bowl of soup in his hands. When he saw Marie was awake, he happily came over and handed the bowl to her.

Inside was porridge made from milk, stock, and bread. Marie thanked him and took it. Her nephew shifted uncomfortably, his hooves clattering on the stone.

"You made this?" she asked.

"I may have knocked into a few things in the process." He scratched his head guiltily.

Thinking about the state of her kitchen was terrifying, so Marie pushed the thought out of her mind. She focused on eating the porridge her nephew had

made for her, despite the fact he knew nothing of cooking.

“The best thing about having two legs is that I can clean every corner of the house,” Marie said pointedly. Hazel cringed, laughing.

“This is a long way to go, but would you deliver it for me?”

As Hazel got ready to leave, Marie handed him an apple pie, all wrapped up. The leftovers from the night before.

“Sure, but to where?”

“You seemed to think it was awfully good. Take it to my brother.” After all, Marie said, she’d made the pie using apples from the tree he’d given her.

Only the faintest whiff of frozen flowers hung around her now.

“I’ll be glad to take it to him.” Hazel gave a mock human salute. He carefully put the pie and Marie’s present in his bag and then taped the lid. She’d never once asked him to deliver anything before. He’d been a courier for a while, but this job felt special.

“How much?” she asked.

“If you prepare another spread like last night the next time I visit, that’s all the payment I need.”

“You realize that’s far more expensive?”

“Fair!” Hazel laughed out loud.

“Do come again, Hazel.” Marie waved him off.

Behind her, an old horseshoe now hung on the mint green door.

“Mmm. I will, Marie.”

With that, Hazel folded his arms and galloped away on his four hooves.

December 26th had no snow or wind. It was just another cloudy English day.

The dried-up winter trees stretched bony branches across the sky. The gray stone walls piled along the road were cold and heavy. Nothing grew in the fields.

But as Hazel headed to the far north end of the land, along narrow country

roads, the sights seemed strangely new.

He already knew what he'd give his aunt next time.

The End



The Vampire's Lover

Makoto Sanda

1

She had beautiful eyes, the color of currants.

I saw her in the garden that my wife had left to me. Brightly colored roses surrounded her—perhaps that's why she left such an impression.

Her hair seemed combed with moonlight, and the daring cut of her dress appeared entirely unreal. It was as if she stood in a moment out of time.

Yet...

"Joel," a voice said. "Joel Garland!"

A friend called my name, summoning me back to reality. I still resent him for it.

Of course, there was no woman standing among those roses. I was alone, just gaping like a fool with a watering can in my hand.

"What's got into you?" my friend asked.

"Oh, nothing. I just drifted off a bit." I pressed a finger to my brow, shaking my head. If my desires were strong enough to cause hallucinations, I would have liked to enjoy them a little longer. "For a moment I thought I saw a girl here."

"You, with a girl?" he snickered. His laughter made his khaki jacket crinkle. He always wore army surplus clothing. Appropriate for his line of work, but perhaps it was a bit too much. I sometimes worried he'd lost track of where work ended and his life began. "That's rich at your age! Suddenly getting a taste for the ladies?"

"It was all my imagination!" I objected.

He shook his head. "You've always been one for fainting spells."

“And you’re the one who took off work to take me to the doctor each time.” This was an old joke between us. He was one of the only people I kept in touch with from my days at the post office. I was never the most popular man, and few old acquaintances cared enough to come see me all the way out here in the country, although my friend made his visits less out of genuine concern and more due to an inability to leave well enough alone.

“But I suppose it’s about time you started looking for someone else,” he said.

“Easier said than done.”

“You said the exact same thing before you got married.”

“My parents set up that match. And they’re no longer with us.”

Perhaps he felt he’d stepped in it. He was silent for several seconds as he looked around the rose garden. Scratching his head, he elected to change the subject.

“You still writing?”

“Not lately,” I admitted.

It had been quite a while since I’d touched a sheet of paper or had so much as picked up my beloved fountain pen. I simply stayed out here in the country, tending the roses as my wife once had. Sheer inertia was all that kept me going. It wasn’t that I wished to die myself. Mine had just become a life that didn’t feel worth living.

Perhaps that was why I felt I had nothing left to write. The need to write, whether for ambition or as an outlet, is always the result of some powerful drive.

“You always had an ear for a good turn of phrase,” he said.

“Nobody ever complimented the plots.”

“Who could follow them? They were all...philosophical. Reading them made my head hurt!”

“Ha ha.”

I’d been told as much in college.

The rows of novels on my shelves had been a bad influence, I supposed. I didn't believe complexity was better; rather, everything I wrote simply turned out that way. If I let my guard down for a second, the wording would get ever so stiff, to my great regret.

For a while, he smiled.

"Well, if you write anything more, let me read it."

"I will."

A promise I did not expect I'd ever need to keep.

Wrinkly and gaunt. Hardly my type at all.

I had loved someone to death recently and was now looking for a new lover.

Oh, don't get the wrong idea. My old lover had died, to be sure, but neither violently nor involuntarily. I may not have explained the price he'd pay in so many words, but I'm sure he figured it out on his own. Really, all any poet wants is to pour their soul onto the page and then die. Savoring the fading aftertaste of his demise, I was flitting about, still rather intoxicated.

I'm a leannán sídhe.

We're a sort of vampire that gives men talent and takes their blood as payment.

Using the word vampire may make me sound quite mad, but the world is a far stranger place than people realize. There are still alchemists and mages around, you know. It's just that humans can't usually see us faeries.

And while we *do* drink blood, it's a mutually beneficial deal. Those on whom I set my sights die a little early, but I give them a little more talent in return. This is where those tedious alchemists start trying to define "talent" or asking about the relationship between blood and life energy. Such dreary bores, alchemists. None of that matters to us!

Anyway, I've been repeating this pattern for more years than I care to count. From time to time it did cross my mind to try something new, but that's really all there is to know about me.

I suppose I'd just lost my way.

I got lost rather a lot. I'd live it up with others of my kind, meet a poor banshee sitting in a ruined home. You know, as one does.

The skies that day were clear—hardly common for this time of year, in this country. I was flying around, enjoying the sunshine, when I discovered the most beautiful rose garden. I like wild flowers, too, but gardens tended by human hands have their own kind of wonder. Unless you look after roses with incredible care, you don't get these massive blooms, like baby cheeks. Lovely!

I've always had a weakness for such things.

I drifted down to the ground, lured in by the roses.

Their color entranced me. Their fragrance stole my heart.

I couldn't help but wonder who'd raised them.

That's why my discovery came as such a surprise.

I could feel someone's gaze on me. I looked up, and our eyes met.

"....."

Wrinkly and gaunt. Hardly my type at all.

Oh, absolutely not my type. He was far too old to have such childlike wonder in his eyes! His neck had no beauty; it looked weak! He was all hunched over, clinging to that cheap watering can! Nothing about him plucked at my heartstrings at all.

Well...nothing should have.

"Joel," a voice said. I looked up.

This human appeared to have a visiting friend.

"Joel Garland!"

"Oh."

The man turned in answer to the name. When he looked back in my direction, he could no longer see me. Still, he was no mage, no alchemist. So how could he have seen a faerie? What had happened was a fluke, surely. One that would not

occur again.

Yet I kept standing there.

Of course, it was the roses. What other reason could there be to remain? I wasn't here for this man who spoke in such apologetic tones. There was no reason for my eyes to follow him as he scratched his cheek awkwardly.

It was nothing but a whim.

The man—Joel Garland was far too imposing a name for such a quiet man—definitely found no favor with me. But on a whim, I decided it might not be so bad to remain with these roses a while longer.

2

My life was rather dull.

Once I finished watering the roses and tending the soil, I did nothing but prepare meals and lock myself up in my study. A vast selection of books filled my sturdy bookcases. Unfortunately, I was getting awfully close to having read the lot.

I'd imagined I would retire one day, but I had done so far sooner than anticipated. Now, I found myself at a loss for how to fill the time. This had led to me conquering nine-tenths of the bookshelves rather quickly. Attempts to supplement my stock proved inadequate. I ordered new books through the post, but most were scarcely worth reading. The good books I found were hardly enough to assuage the boredom of a bibliomaniac hermit.

I'd nearly finished my current mystery novel and had begun to feel frustrated. I tried to pace myself. Rereading books was fine, but nothing could compare to the pleasure of that first read.

Taking a deep breath, I gulped down the rest of my now-cold coffee and pressed a finger between my eyes. When I was younger I could happily read all day long, but the activity took more out of me now. Perhaps slowing down like this was some small salvation. I stretched my arms to ease the stiffness in my back and took several deep breaths.

When I was young, I had never imagined my lungs would one day ache just from breathing in.

Even sitting still like this wore me out now.

A girl with eyes like currants...

That daydream crossed my mind again.

She was an illusion surrounded by roses. Considering she'd surprised *me*, the way her own eyes widened had been shocking. Still, that fleeting glimpse remained burned into my retinas. Yes, it must have been just my imagination, but it was unforgettably clear. Every color, every hue remained etched in my mind as if carved in stone.

Like a novel I'd read long ago...

"That's right," I said aloud.

Once the idea came, I acted swiftly. I had what I needed right here in the study. Opening the drawer, I found everything ready.

For the first time in years, I held my beloved fountain pen in my hand.

I had purchased an ample supply of writing paper many years ago, and here it remained. I hardly planned to enter any contests with this piece. As long as it was legible, I could even write the entire thing in a notebook. Even if this was just for me, I'd prefer to maintain certain standards.

The last time I'd used the fountain pen, I'd cleaned it properly. It still worked well.

I drew ink from the pot and scratched a few lines on the side of the notepad to get a feel for it again.

I hesitated before the blank page for a while, but at last I began to write.

The first sentence...

My life was very repetitive.

I wandered about outside the house, returning before Joel hauled his lazy ass out of bed around noon. Sometimes I'd gaze at the color of the wind. Other

times I'd listen to the trees whispering. Mine was a very laid-back life. Maybe some humans would say, "How very like a faerie!" Like they understand anything.

But I spent much of my time looking at roses.

In the chilly morning garden, I loved watching the tiny rainbows that formed whenever Joel tilted the watering can. He really had the laziest life! Apart from tending to the roses, he grumbled whenever he had to do anything, even cook!

Books filled his study, and I didn't mind watching him read his way through them. As a leannán sídhe, anyone who loves the written word is okay in my book. But above all else, we desire a lover who will create wonderful new works. This human hardly counted.

Until one day, his life took a turn.

"That's right," he muttered.

Then he opened the drawer to his study desk.

When I saw what he took out, my eyes went wide.

"What? What! So he *is* a poet!"

When he picked up a fountain pen, I couldn't help but smile.

Yes. This was how it should be. This explained why I'd lingered here so long. Leannán sídhe are drawn to poets. We take their blood in exchange for talent.

The first words he wrote were:

A rose garden, hazy like a dizzy spell, fragile like a soap bubble.

I met her amongst the white roses.

"....."

For a moment, I felt as if he'd touched my very heart.

In fits and starts, Joel's pen moved down the page.

The story was simple enough: a man and a woman meet in a garden, exchange simple pleasantries, and catch a glimpse of each other's hearts. No challenges, no real resolution. He wrote as the thoughts came to him. The man

and woman parted without any real progress being made, and Joel's pen stopped.

"Hmph."

It wasn't much of a story, I thought.

He certainly wasn't overburdened with talent. He wasn't hopeless, either, but not at all what I usually went for. I liked words that flowed like gentle rain. While there was a dewy quality to his prose, it was much more like a driving wind.

But something about it caught in my heart, a slight twinge that tugged at my attention, like something stuck to my skin. It was hardly great, but the words were distinctively his. When his pen moved again, I listened closely to the sound of it scratching the paper.

And... And if he was writing, that was enough.

"Hey," I whispered.

My words would never reach a normal person. Only mages or alchemists could hear me. But someone with talent would catch the ripples of my voice. This was what we faeries lived for. This was *why* we lived.

Heat laced my voice. Blood scented my breath.

"Would you like to create the greatest art, even if it cost your blood and your soul?"

The echoes of my voice filled the room.

But if my whisper reached him, he did not respond.

Like he can't hear me at all! Hmph, I thought. *You might be writing a story, but why can't I reach you?*

The reason was obvious. Someone who had truly dedicated their life to writing might reject our invitation, but they would certainly hear it if they were worthy.

Oh, if only he was one of them.

This man might like novels but not enough to risk his life for them.

Such a shame. I was a fool. I could hardly call myself a leannán sídhe, drawn to a man like this.

But wait.

Then what was that rose garden?

All he needed to do was dedicate his life to art. Any form of beauty would do, not just the written word. Half-praying, I whispered to him again.

“Don’t you want to make those roses even more beautiful?”

“The roses aren’t mine.” This time, he whispered an answer to the page, his pen never stopping. “The rose garden belongs to my wife.”

Wife!

I’d imagined our connection. It was all my own fantasy. I wafted backwards, ready to keel over. The shock and the shame were so great, I felt ready to vanish from the earth. For a moment, I genuinely wished that I could.

I blinked. The urge to die dissipated, replaced by something else.

I’ll get in his way.

A fiery rage possessed me.

Of course, this was *not* jealousy. It was simple revenge. Anyone who tricked me would receive a decisive, fatal blow in return. Joel looked around the room, as if wondering why he’d spoken out loud, but I was far past caring about his reaction.

I had no choice now.

I was going to have to stick around here until winter at least.

3

I wrote whenever I had the time.

It was a very short story, and I rewrote it over and over. I’m sure that a computer would have helped greatly, but pen and paper were just more my style. Besides, there was little point in making the process more effective. I was

the story's sole intended audience. Perhaps I might show it to a visiting friend on occasion. I'd been inspired just enough that I didn't want to write this story entirely for my own self-satisfaction, but I wasn't trying to make it as a writer.

I had felt differently, once. I think.

Back then...when my wife was alive.

The rose garden was hers.

She had always been a frail woman. Our parents set us up. Shortly after the wedding, she came down with tuberculosis, and we moved to the country for her convalescence. After she started feeling better, she announced that she wanted to grow roses.

At first I thought it was just a way to occupy her time, but she grew so passionate about digging, watering, and the occasional dramatic pruning. Soon it was as if she had married those roses instead of me. Neither of us were great talkers, so perhaps she filled the silence with those flowers.

I enjoyed helping her with them.

Wiping the sweat off my brow with the back of my gardening glove, I thought marrying her was the right choice.

But our time together lasted only a few years. I suppose those few years made our move to the country worth it. She passed away without us growing much closer, leaving me with a house that was far too large and a garden full of roses.

In a sense, only force of habit kept me going.

I kept doing what she had done for no real reason. If I'd really been in love with her, there might have been meaning to it, but my feelings never deepened. I'd thought of her as family but nothing more. Perhaps this was my punishment.

Punishment was probably too grandiose a word. It was smaller than that, a thorn pricking my heart. Like when I pricked my thumb while tending the roses. Not a strong pain but one that throbbed dully for a while after.

Perhaps remembering that pain made me feel as if I could write a little longer.

Hopeless, wasn't it?

“Hopeless? I’m just an old fool,” I muttered. It felt like someone agreed with me.

If I was seeing and hearing things, perhaps my end was drawing near. Honestly, I found that thought comforting. This house was far too large for only one person. It was just too much space.

My vision blurred, so I took off my glasses and stretched.

These days, I tired easily. Maybe I was just old. Perhaps I should take up jogging, but I was never one for exercise. If I ever admitted as much, that khaki-jacketed friend of mine would surely mock me.

“Let’s have a cup of tea,” I said. I stood up and picked out some leaves.

Today, I went with chamomile. Not my usual tea, but I felt like trying something different. I mixed it with a little orange peel, a recently acquired taste. I had a strange feeling someone would like the scent of it, but that was foolish. Who else but me would drink it?

I’d lost all motivation.

My passion for interfering with Joel had dissipated two seasons ago. All a leannán sídhe could really do to a human was love—or rather, drink—them and give them talent. Beyond that, we couldn’t be seen or touched. We were little more than air, or even less, since our absence did not inconvenience humans in the slightest.

But those roses were still beautiful.

Joel hadn’t done anything unusual to the roses, so perhaps the ground here was just suited to them. Perhaps Joel’s lazy, whimsical style matched the garden’s needs. The roses bloomed all year round, so my eyes always had something to see.

However, Joel’s writing did not seem to be getting anywhere.

He always started the next revision before he’d finished the last.

I didn’t object to his struggle. Our kind love watching writers struggle with this wording or that. But since he wasn’t devoting his life to his writing, I thought he

should at least finish the story before starting again. A hundred disasters lead to a single good work and ten thousand lead to a masterpiece.

And this was just a short story! You could read the entire thing in a matter of minutes. Fast readers could be done in fewer than ten. How much fiddling did a story that length need?

As I watched him struggle away in his study, I grew suddenly furious.

“You’re hopeless, you know that?”

“Hopeless? I’m just an old fool,” he said, as if answering me.

Things like this happened from time to time, though I no longer paid it any attention. Our words matched up on occasion, but it was all just coincidence. Perfectly natural, considering we lived similar lives.

Yet, I didn’t hate the time we spent like this.

If he enjoyed revising his work, then oh well. It’s not like I would die anytime soon. He could do what he wanted, and I would sit with him.

“Let’s have a cup of tea,” he said, stretching.

“Make it chamomile,” I ordered, and he obliged.

See? He made what I asked for sometimes. Well, about once out of every five requests.

Even faeries love the smell of herbal tea. The crisp scent of chamomile perfectly mingled with a touch of orange peel. These days, he seemed to enjoy mixing that into everything.

“Yes, this might be your calling. You’re no great shakes as a writer, but you could open a half-decent café,” I said. I watched him savor the scent and then take a sip.

What a fool I was.

I’d sworn revenge and then never done a thing to him. I could easily drink his blood, but doing so to someone who didn’t live for his writing would go against the very nature of the leannán sídhe.

So I did nothing, and nothing happened.

But I didn't mind that.

I settled down for a nap on his shoulder. He couldn't feel my weight on him.

"Such a shame. You can't even enjoy the smell of a fine lady like me."

"Who says I can't?" he replied.

I jumped.

But of course, he wasn't looking at me.

"Hmm. I suppose that would work."

He was talking to the page, sipping his chamomile tea. The words he spoke matched so closely to mine that my heart skipped a beat. If my fist could have touched him, I'd definitely have hit him for that.

I meant it!

Honestly, he deserved it!

Before I could unleash my anger upon him, he spoke again.

"I used to hate roses."

He must have been talking to himself; he couldn't know about me. I braced myself and listened closely.

"I enjoyed helping you, but the thorns pricked me, and the work was a pain. The cost of the fertilizer every month is absurd. It's only force of habit that keeps me going."

The sound of his scratching pen filled the study.

I felt like you could sense his emotions in the stroke of the pen.

"But that's not the case anymore. I don't know why...but I feel like the work is giving someone pleasure."

He frowned at this, puzzled, like he didn't understand the words he had said. His words rattled me to the heart—how pathetic! I clutched my hands to my mouth.

Still resting on his shoulders, I closed my eyes.

"I love the roses," I murmured.

Why?

I shouldn't have been able to feel the heat of his body, either—yet in that moment, his shoulders felt awfully warm.

The warmth was bittersweet.

“Yes, I just love the roses. As long as I can see the roses, I don't mind staying here.”

4

Several years passed.

I still tended the rose garden, still wrote.

Or rather, rewrote. I wrote the same scenes over and over, without ever growing tired of them. Anyone observing would have considered me a fool. I've heard of military tortures where people are forced to dig holes and then fill them in again. The sheer exhaustion of this labor drives them to the brink of insanity, and what I was doing was not far removed from madness. Of course, I chose to do this, so I did not suffer. However, I doubt the distinction would matter to a stranger.

No.

That's not right. I *did* suffer.

I felt like I was plunging into clear lake water. If I ran out of breath, I could always surface; no one forced me to dive deeper. Yet every second I could spare, I dove back under. Without even thinking about it, I would find my pen in my hand as I tried to get another sentence down.

I sometimes wondered if I would ever finish the story.

It's not like the story had anything like a proper plot. I simply allowed my pen free rein as the whim struck me. Any real writer would laugh at my efforts. Some might even grow angry with me.

But I was no real writer, and I didn't care to have a stranger read my work.

This story was more like a diary, a reflection of myself at the time I wrote it.

The roses were different every day, too. The dew dripping off the petals, the staunch thorns, the leaves soaking in the sunlight; not once were they ever the same. I realized this after I started writing. Up until that point, I'd looked after the garden purely because I always had, but lately that had begun to change.

One could say I'd become more aware of the seasons.

Just being conscious of the moisture on the wind or the way the sun shone had a shocking effect on the flowers' bloom.

Once I became aware of that, a single day turned into more than a collection of twenty-four hours. The blanks where the loneliness became too much to bear, the joy of discovering a great new book—every experience became a unique moment in time. Instead of feeling repetitive, each moment became something special.

The story was the same.

Every time I wrote it, the description of the woman in it changed.

Sometimes she was blonde. Sometimes she had black hair, like my wife. Eventually, I began describing her hair as the color of moonlight. The first time I wrote the word "moonlight," I called out in surprise.

"Ah!"

I blinked at it, astonished and somewhat mortified.

How had I only just realized?

How many years had I been circling around this one thing?

"The girl with eyes like currants..."

"How dense can one man be?!"

How many times had I said this?

Honestly, all this time Joel had been writing and rewriting the same story. Several winters had passed, and I kept hanging around and looking at the roses. In all that time he'd never once found an ending for his story.

Seriously, he had never tried to finish it. Why was that?

But what did that say about me? I knew he was never going to finish, but I remained.

I couldn't understand it, and that infuriated me. I was constantly angry. The roses bloomed year-round, so at least I could appreciate some gorgeous flowers. Wrapped in their fragrant scent, yet always angry... I was a fool.

Yet however many times he rewrote his story, I couldn't bring myself to hate Joel's writing.

His style was far from what I liked, but something struck me about the stiff wording, the traces of fleeting emotions. You could hardly scream from the rooftops about his talent, but the shade of his heart was definitely visible within his work.

The hue of his soul.

The flavor of it?

I stuck out my tongue.

I knew he wasn't much of a talent, but I wondered what his blood tasted like. I didn't expect it to smell of roses, but I imagined it did. Perhaps it would be more like stale wine, a wine so old it was no longer drinkable. Its rich fruitiness would be long gone, but a bitterness might linger on the tongue, reminding you of what it once had been... You know, that sort of flavor.

He was rewriting that story again.

I met her in a rose garden.

He always started there.

He'd trimmed the embellishments, making it far easier to read. No draft was inherently better, but I preferred this version. His pen moved on to the next line.

Eyes like red currants. Swaying gently between the flower petals, her hair was the color of moonlight.

Oh...

Why?

What was he writing?

I couldn't understand. I didn't *want* to understand. If I accepted this, something fundamental in me would crumble. My every instinct screamed.

Yet...

"Oh," Joel said, nodding. Sheepishly, a smile played across his lips. "The girl with eyes like currants might be my first love."

I stopped breathing.

What?

My chest froze. My faerie heart had turned to ice. The chill spread through my organs, through my blood and nerves.

I could not know the answer to this unforeseen question. I couldn't make this choice. Had I been waiting for this? I knew more about love than anyone. If he desired it, I should just grant his request.

My thoughts fragmented, as if I'd split into two.

Like a fool, I was fighting with myself. How absurd! There was no reason for me to do this. I felt nothing for this wrinkly man!

I fled the house.

Outside, I found myself surrounded by brilliant flower petals.

The red and white roses swayed in the strong breeze. A gust of wind blew a cluster of petals into my path, cutting off my escape.

Those beautiful roses were now terrifying.

For the first time since I could remember, I hunched over and crawled away. I couldn't fly. Flattened, I dragged myself across the ground. My feet felt like anchors. My heart had turned to stone. I couldn't think straight. Faerie bodies would leave no marks on the garden's soft soil, but I strained desperately to get away from that house.

At last, I reached the forest. Only then did I look back.

Joel's house seemed so tiny. If I kept running, the forest would soon hide it from view. Yet I couldn't bring myself to go further.

"....."

I clutched my chest and doubled over.

For ages I sat like that, unable to move a muscle.

5

One winter afternoon, I received a rare visit from my friend.

He stood clutching the sleeves of his coat in the cold. He glanced over me and scowled.

"Did you just get out of the hospital, Joel?"

"No? I've been just fine."

"You always looked older than you were, but it's like you've added a decade since I last saw you. We're supposed to be the same age, you know!" he said.

"I remember. But honestly, I've been feeling pretty good lately."

A look of genuine concern crossed his face. "Were you not before?"

"I'd gained a bit of weight, I expect. Please don't give me any lectures on how I should take up jogging or drink grapefruit juice."

I let him in and put the kettle on.

As the water boiled, I put leaves in a pot, realizing absently that I'd added enough for three people instead of two. I warmed the cups and slowly filled the pot with hot water. Today it was rose hip tea. My friend would be tired from the trip here, so the acidity would refresh him. I added a little honey a nearby beekeeper had given me and carried our tea to the living room.

"Here," I said.

"Thanks." He took a sip. "Well, at least you're getting better at *one* thing."

He was full of pointed remarks today.

He put his cup down. "Truth is, I'm getting married," he said.

This sudden announcement did not surprise me.

I nodded and picked up my own cup.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks. It's a workplace marriage. You know, the receptionist who admired you."

This *did* surprise me.

"Since when has anyone admired me?"

"You didn't realize?"

"No, no. You must be pulling my leg."

"Nope. She liked the way you used to gloomily read by yourself on breaks. You'll catch a woman's eye like that, you know. Or I suppose you don't, since you never noticed."

"Huh. Well."

It wasn't just that I'd failed to notice her interest.

I'd lost my wife before we ever really fell in love, and it had taken me years to realize my feelings for a mysterious woman I'd glimpsed for a single instant. Comparing these two memories made me quite cross with myself.

If someone out there was odd enough to adore me in full knowledge of my quirks, then I'm sure—

Sure of what?

What was I even thinking?

Who was I fantasizing about here? These dreams were far too good to be true. I was behaving like a young fool. I loosened my collar, feeling the heat of embarrassment. I felt like someone had just asked me out on my way to school.

"You'll come to the wedding?" my friend asked, winking. His teeth gleamed.

How theatrical. But he was often like this. Of course, he always got what he deserved.

“How many marriages does this make?”

“It’s my third,” he chuckled.

We could not be less alike.

I believe that’s why we’d stayed in touch, even after I moved out here. At the very least, I never minded preparing a pot of tea for his visits. Fortunately, the cookies I served weren’t stale, so we chatted a while longer.

Eventually, it occurred to me to mention my own news. “I’ve been writing again.”

“Oh!” he cried, overjoyed.

Embarrassed, I thought that his reaction was far too effusive for what amounted to little more than a collection of noodling.

“You’ve got to let me read it.”

“If I ever finish it,” I said, with a shrug.

After I saw him to the bus stop, I looked at myself in the mirror.

“I suppose I *do* look a little gaunt.”

I was a widower, after all.

I made sure my diet stayed balanced but could never fix my innate laziness. Even with my wife gone, I simply didn’t feel like hiring a housekeeper. Should I die like this, the postman would find me, or my friend would when he came to visit. Perhaps I should do something about my situation.

“At the least, I should eat a bit more meat,” I muttered, glancing at the ceiling.

Lately, I felt like I hadn’t heard anyone agree with me. True, I’d never actually *heard* an agreement, but it was also true that something felt missing. Perhaps that made no sense, but it reminded me of my earlier conversation with my friend.

Had I benefitted from something without ever realizing it?

In that case, perhaps I’d made a terrible mistake that I could barely understand.

“Huh!”

A yelp of surprise.

I was in the forest.

Dew dripped off the branches, each drop sending the smell of cold earth to invade my nostrils.

I sat on the damp ground.

I hadn't moved at all since that day. I wasn't human, so I could go months or even years without moving an inch if I felt like it. I hardly ever had to feed on blood to stay alive. But when my heart suffered, so did my appearance. Even a creature like me can't avoid such a fate.

I'd lost all sense of time. It took me ages to respond to the voice I'd heard.

“Are you still not back in town?”

Another leannán sídhe stood beside me, making a mock show of horror.

Come to think of it, I'd been talking to her before I found Joel's house. We faeries didn't have names of our own, nor did we really identify each other as individuals. Still, I vaguely remembered her from the way she spoke.

“Did you already...” I began to ask, trailing off.

“Yes. I found someone new, and loved him dry.”

Her smile was so beautiful, like mine had once been.

She glanced in the direction I was staring.

“Oh, you settled in on that house? Found one you like?” she asked.

“I don't like him!” I cried, almost reflexively. “He's all wrinkly! Gaunt! Lazy!”

“Hmm. Like any of that matters.”

She yawned, looking as if she didn't care at all.

She was carefree, like I used to be. I'm sure I'd have said the same thing to her

if our positions were reversed. Our lovers' talent was all that mattered. Caring at all what they looked like was a mistake. I knew that, but I couldn't bring myself to admit it.

"I just...can't stand those roses," I said.

"That's great, sweetie!"

These words did not come from me or the other leannán sídhe. Rather, they came from a faerie hovering nearby. She looked like a young girl, with wavy hair and unnaturally large, bright eyes. Bird's wings grew from her back, and two feelers sprouted out of her forehead. All these details indicated what she was.

"Ariel!"

A spirit of the air.

She was not of our kind, but if the whim struck us we would talk with anything.

"There's a storm coming soon!" she said, displaying the innocent, delighted smile of a child talking about a trip to an amusement park. Faeries often looked like this.

"A storm?"

"Yes! A very big storm. I've been drawn here by it, sweetie. It'll blow away all those roses you can't stand."

My throat went dry.

If a spirit of the air said this, then it would come true. This was a prophecy. The storm would come, as if the ariels themselves had called it here.

To that garden. To that house.

To *him*.

"You can't!" I said at last. I shook my head. I felt weak. My stomach hurt, like I was digesting rocks. "You can't! Those roses are—"

"But you said you couldn't stand them! In that case, what's wrong with getting rid of them all?"

"Everything!" I screamed. Clutching my head, I bunched up and hurled my

words into the ground. “Those roses don’t deserve that! I could never love them, but I don’t want them scattered. I don’t want them gone! Not ever!”

“Well, don’t yell about it to me!” The ariel shrugged. “The storm’s almost here.”

Dark, sinister clouds covered the sky.

7

That evening, I made tea in my study.

Chamomile again. No particular reason. I didn’t especially like the taste, but I’d begun making this tea whenever the mood struck me.

I kept closing my fists and opening them again.

These days, I definitely felt better.

The suffocating weariness I’d felt was long gone, along with unwelcome apathy. I felt five or ten years younger. I wasn’t exercising, so I’d never anticipated feeling this good.

Yet my writing had stopped.

Despite what I’d told my friend, I hadn’t touched the page in a while. It felt like I no longer had anyone around to read the finished work—which was absurd, of course.

I’d never had anyone like that.

“I wonder why I felt that way,” I muttered, glancing out the window.

A dense forest lay beyond the rose garden. With my bad eyesight, it resembled nothing more than a dark green blur. For some reason, though, I spent a lot of time staring at it.

Clouds boiled over the sunset.

As night arrived, the winds began to howl. The storm’s strength shocked me, and my eyes widened.

“Oh, dear.”

I hastily turned the radio on.

An announcer read a high wind warning over the static.

Storms were rare in this area, so I'd missed the signs until now. I remembered the legends of the Wild Hunt. They were stories about a band of hundreds of faeries and spirits that raced across the sky during powerful storms. Areas with few storms were especially likely to cast a mystic veil across such natural disasters.

But this was no time to let such fanciful things prey upon my imagination.

I quickly changed my clothes, preparing myself as best I could, and ran out of the house.

"This is bad," I groaned.

Even in such a short amount of time, the storm had grown far worse.

The wind cut right through my body, scattering petals from my garden everywhere. Several hundred petals whipped all around me, as if a giant hand had scooped them up. The sight hardly seemed real. I could not afford to gaze around in wonder, though.

Enduring the pounding rain, I hammered stakes around the roses, laying down as many nets as I could. My newfound health gave me the energy to do so. Hard to believe that a few months ago this amount of exertion would have left me ragged. I'd have collapsed with the job half-done.

My nose filled with a rusty scent. Was I straining myself so much I'd popped a blood vessel?

I didn't want to lose these blooms.

Why was that?

Because my wife had planted them?

No. Something inside me shook its head. That was part of it, but the real reason lay elsewhere.

I felt like these roses provided a vital link between me and someone else.

But who?

I don't know.

I didn't know anything. Why I was acting like this. How I really felt. What I wanted to live for.

There were no guarantees in life, no matter what you did wrong or right. I only ever seemed to learn the truth about things when it was too late. A pervasive gloom knotted in the pit of my stomach.

All the wasted hours of my life piled up inside of me, like dust in my study.

Still...

Oh.

Part of me was slightly happy.

This wasn't inertia. I'd thought I was tending these roses simply because I always had, but that wasn't the case anymore.

For love?

I felt it.

I mean, that's what it was.

"After all, *you* might come to see the roses."

I'd met her here first, so I couldn't afford to lose them.

From the bottom of my heart, I prayed for at least one bloom to survive.

The storm grew visibly stronger.

Even with the ridiculous amount of time I'd lived, I'd rarely seen rain and wind pound the earth like this.

I couldn't bear to watch this happen and fled the forest.

Flying at full speed, I was only a few minutes away.

All I could see were roses. White and red petals swirled around me and filled the air, like blood gushing out of the garden.

In the thick of it, I saw him struggling.

He placed nets around the roses, pounded new stakes around the places that had no nets. His frail body struggled against the storm as he tried to save what roses he could. Just seeing him like this made my heart want to break.

Yet I knew his actions were futile.

No net was going to save those roses from wind like this. One mistake and Joel would be in danger. It wasn't at all unusual for humans to die after being struck by lightning or hit by flying debris. Deteriorating houses, bricks—danger waited all around. Joel knew that perfectly well.

So why did he look so happy?

"After all, *you* might come to see the roses."

"....."

At his words, something released within me.

Backing away, I clapped my hands to my mouth. As I did, I found the ariel I'd spoken with earlier hovering beside me. She'd said the storm had brought her here, and she was clearly enjoying the spectacle.

So I called out to her, my voice hoarse.

"Please. Stop these winds."

"I'll need payment, sweetie," she replied.

I'd known she would say that, but I froze anyway.

I had nothing but my body. Nothing to offer her.

But this time she had a proposal.

"If you leave him be in this storm, he might wander over to our side."

The ariel glanced meaningfully at Joel, at the way he fought for those roses.

I'm sure that was just a whim flickering through her mind. Our kind tempted or meddled with humans. They did not speak to us on their own. But my reaction to Joel's words must have caught her interest.

"It's not often we get a wind this good. There's every chance at least one human might wander into it," the spirit said. "What he said just now was ever

so interesting. Living together, having fun together, laughing together...that doesn't sound like such a bad idea, does it?"

"....."

I was tempted.

I doubt any normal leannán sídhe would even have considered it.

But if I could stare back at him, talk to him...if he could make me tea, if I could eat sweets with him. If we could talk about the stories he wrote, even a little bit.

The temptation was so wonderful.

I wanted to say yes. I longed to be with him forever.

But that temptation was reward enough.

"That's not right."

The tremor in my voice vanished.

I looked the ariel right in the eye.

"That's not what I want. The only way my kind can love humans is to sip and inspire. That means...that means I don't love him."

I couldn't love him. That could never be.

I'd believed that for so long. Love would have to be a miracle.

"Then what do you want, sweetie? Do you take back your request?"

"Chamomile tea," I whispered.

"What?"

"Chamomile tea with orange peel blended in. When he goes in to rest, I'm sure he'll make a cup. You'd enjoy the fragrance and color of it, right?"

Whatever she made of my offer, the ariel simply nodded. A smile traced her lips.

"Let's call that a deal, then."

She put her finger to her lips, winked at me, and then turned into the wind.

“All I can do is ease the storm a tad, and only in this area.”

“That’s enough,” I said.

“Then pray this goes well.”

The ariel pleaded into the wind.

Her words were like a song, a melody that altered nature itself.

I was fairly certain her last words were spiteful, but I, too, prayed in the face of this rushing wind. Vampires had nobody to pray to, but my pleas were genuine.

How could they not be?

I’d first met him here. I couldn’t lose this place.

“Yes,” I whispered. “If I was the only one who remembered these roses, that would be awful.”

8

The wedding day was beautifully clear.

My friend’s new wife, two decades younger than he, seemed lost in the moment. My friend, now married for the third time, looked worn out yet happy. I barely remembered a thing about my own wedding, but I recalled being so exhausted I swore never to go through it again.

I believe this was a good wedding.

I never did let my friend read my story. I’d finally written an ending of sorts, but that could wait for another occasion.

As I made my way home, the sun began to set.

I could see my house in the distance.

From far away, everything around the house seemed covered in white.

Somehow, I’d saved nearly half the roses. The postman said it was a miracle that so many of them had survived that storm. I’d never been one to believe in

God, but if you had told me that some higher being saved me, I'd have believed it.

After the storm, I'd had a sudden urge to make a cup of chamomile tea before collapsing into bed. Perhaps that was why.

Dwelling on the memory, I squinted at the world bathed in the red of sunset.

Dusk. Twilight. Magic hour.

Would I meet someone?

If I could pick any one person to meet...

My gaze dropped to the ground to the shadows at my feet.

My shadow alone should have stretched out before me, but for a moment I believed another shadow hovered beside mine. A lady's shadow.

"Now, now," I said, shaking my head in disbelief.

It was a trick of the eyes. A fleeting fantasy. The woman I had dreamed about, appearing in a delusion. This was a one-way ticket to the madhouse.

"....."

But nobody else saw, so whom did it harm?

Cajoling my tired body and aching back, I held up one hand.

"May I take your hand, young lady?"

I couldn't imagine saying that to anyone real.

I would never even write that line into my story. It wouldn't make it into a poem. Even saying such things aloud with no one else around made my ears burn. At my age, it was still possible to turn beet red.

But just for today...

Today, surely it was allowed.

I thought it was all going to disappear.

The ariel and the other leannán sídhe had long since gone. I alone remained in

the rose garden. When I saw Joel headed back from the wedding, I went out to meet him on a whim. Nothing more to it. The only reason I stayed was because half the roses remained. I felt I might as well gaze upon them a while longer. No other reason at all.

Yet.

When I caught up with him, he reached his hand out towards me. I froze, as if snared in his spell.

“May I take your hand, young lady?”

His voice quivered. Not exactly smooth.

His hand wasn't at the right angle, and his back was bent. He'd pulled the tuxedo out of storage too late to get it altered, so it was far too baggy. Nothing about him made my heart yearn.

I hesitated for a few seconds. Maybe a few minutes.

But then, slowly, I took his hand.

“Why thank you, kind sir.”

Mimicking good etiquette, I bent a single knee.

No serenade played for our ball. There were no gorgeous chandeliers. There wasn't even a campfire for us to gaily prance around.

But his feet tapped out a few steps.

I don't believe it.

You don't believe it, either, do you?

A few steps of a waltz.

The movements were clumsy, like a toddler playing house. He made a stiff, yet natural turn, followed by a closed change. These were just a few steps but performed with such heart that they seemed to last forever.

I'm dancing with you.

It was like...

No. No metaphors sufficed.

In the light of the sunset, to music no one could hear, he waltzed with someone human eyes could never behold.

If someone had seen me, they would have thought me a fool.

They would have yelled at me for my foolish dreams.

Even faeries would have believed me foolish.

They'd have scolded me for forgetting what I was.

Yet...

Until we vanish from this earth, may this moment never be forgotten.

The End



Pyrite Knight

Kairi Aotsuki

Stones contain the world's memories.

My father was a geologist. He'd often said those words to me when I was little.

Stones are an accumulation of layers of sediment, or rapidly cooling lava from a volcanic eruption, or places that were once underwater being raised up. My father told me how these radical changes created minerals over the centuries.

Even a pebble by the side of the road had formed long before I was born, shaped over a vast amount of time.

"Felicia, did you find it?"

My friend's voice brought me back to reality.

I turned around to find a girl with long braids watching me with a concerned expression. My friend, Alma, crouched down beside me, her long skirt hiked up.

We were in a graveyard outside London. Rows of crosses marked the graves, dyed orange by the setting sun.

"Sorry, I don't see it anywhere."

"Oh," she said, hope fading. "I could swear I lost it when I was paying my respects here yesterday."

"You really liked that keychain, huh? Well, I'll look a little longer. Don't give up yet!"

But Alma shook her head.

"You've done enough. It's a shame, but..." She glanced around the graveyard.

The cross-shaped shadows lengthened across the ground. The graveyard's trees were already covered in darkness.

"I must have dropped it somewhere else. Or someone's picked it up already," said Alma.

"Mmm."

“So let’s get out of here. The sun’s almost down.”

A warm breeze brushed my cheeks. I caught a whiff of something rotten.

“Yeah.” I stood, trying not to glance at the shadows around those trees.

But then something gleamed out of the corner of my eye.

“Ah!” I hastily parted the dense grass. Unfortunately, the thing I uncovered wasn’t what we were looking for. “Sorry, not it.”

“What is it, though?” Alma’s already large eyes widened further as she peered into my hand like an inquisitive squirrel. “Wow,” she said. “A pendant! Is that a crystal on it?”

The pendant’s crystal was about the size of my pinky. Covered in dirt, it must have been lying there for a while.

“I guess someone dropped it,” I said.

“Maybe. Or it could have been left as an offering? Weird thing to find here, either way!”

Alma looked around the graveyard again, as if making sure nobody else was here. Then she folded her arms, lost in thought.

“If we just put it back, I don’t think the owner will ever find it. I’d feel bad just leaving it here. We should take it home and turn it in to the teachers at school tomorrow.”

“Yeah. They might be looking for it, like you were looking for your keychain.”

I hoped we’d find the owner soon.

With that thought, I rubbed the crystal. My eardrums—no, something even further inside my head—vibrated.

“What is it, Felicia?” Alma asked.

“Um, did you hear anything?”

“No, nothing.” Alma shook her head.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but I could have sworn someone whispered something to me.

“Oh! No way! Felicia, are you hearing things I can’t hear again? Eww, don’t! We’re in a graveyard!”

“S-sorry, sorry. Just my imagination, I’m sure.”

Probably.

The rotting stench smelled like it was getting stronger. I was careful not to turn towards it.

“We’d better go. Which of us should hold on to the crystal?” I asked.

“Definitely you, Felicia.” She didn’t hesitate.

“Why?”

“Because you’re the rock expert,” Alma said with pride. With that, she headed for the exit.

I followed. “My dad’s the expert.”

“Same difference! You told me all about the rocks in that brooch, remember? The pirate one?”

“Pyrite,” I corrected without hesitation.

“See?” Alma said, as if she’d proved her point. “You know your rocks.”

“I only know what I’ve been taught.”

I glanced down at the brooch on my chest. It was an antique marcasite piece, shaped like a flower, with a number of tiny cut stones in it. The stones shone like gold, glittering proudly in the sunset.

“They’re so pretty, but they’re just a type of iron! I couldn’t believe it. I thought for sure they were gold!” Alma stared at the marcasite brooch again.

“Natural gold has a softer color. If you compare the two side by side you can easily tell the difference. Pyrite’s color is much stronger. The material’s also harder.”

“Hmm. But it’s still pretty! Shame to call it iron.”

“Iron sulfide. I think we should take pride in what it is. I’m sure it would get mad if it heard you talk like that,” I said with a wink. “If it does, you’d better

apologize for me, Alma. Plead for forgiveness with plenty of tears.”

Alma giggled with me.

Still laughing, we left the graveyard.

The rotting scent that had hovered around us did not follow.

Falling darkness chased me home. No lights shone in the windows of my house. There were few streetlights this far out in the country, so once night fell it was hard to tell if that murmur in the distance was the wind in the trees or a muttering crowd.

Relying only on the feeble streetlamps and the light from the neighbors’ window, I stuck my key in the front door.

My father was a geologist, and his work often kept him out late. After my mother’s death a few years ago, I usually ate supper alone.

Well, I was thirteen now. I could handle it.

I threw something together from the ingredients on hand. When I was done, I headed up the stairs to my room.

As I did, the antique mirror at the foot of the stairs glimmered. Turning to look, I saw a blonde girl. Her hair was in pigtails, and she had spirited eyes.

Me. I saw plenty of my reflection in the mirror every morning as I got ready for school. The marcasite brooch’s gleam had caused that flash.

As for the eyes, I guess I took after my mother.

She had been a spirited woman. When she and my father were together, she had nearly always been the one in charge. Sensible and reliable, she had always been the one to save me when something scary chased after me. If I’d told her she was my hero, she’d have laughed it off. But she truly was my hero.

I’d never dreamed sickness would take her from me.

“Mum...”

I gripped the brooch tight, as if I could sense her warmth through the metal.

This? It’s an amulet. Your grandmother gave it to me. If you wear it, it’ll protect you from harm. That way you can always move forward without fear.

My mother had pressed it into my hand with those words. The stones embedded in it glittered like gold. I'd thought they *were* gold and gone to tell my father. He'd awkwardly explained the truth.

This is a mineral called pyrite. It's often used in so-called marcasite brooches, but marcasite is actually a different mineral. They're both types of iron sulfate, so they're made of both iron and sulfur. Pyrite is beautiful, but it's also very common. Lots of people find some and think they've struck gold, so it's sometimes called Fool's Gold.

Fool's Gold. Because fools thought it was gold and got excited, like I'd just done. I'd felt like even the brooch in my hand shook its head at me in bemusement.

"It's a good memory now."

I'd gone to tell my mother about it, and she'd nodded. "Yeah, it's just iron." That had made it even worse. I'd been the only one who didn't know, the only fool.

I'd been so mortified that I'd planned to hide it away in my jewelry box forever, but now I never took it off.

Because it reminded me of life the way it used to be.

"I miss you, Mum."

I wanted the three of us to be together again. Surrounded by her amazing cooking while Dad talked to us about work, the evenings had flown by.

Nothing but humid darkness lay outside the hall window. With so few streetlights, going outside after sunset took a lot of courage.

Night scared me.

I'd better go to bed early.

I started to take the stairs to my room again, but then there was a knock at the door.

"Huh? Who could that be?"

I wasn't expecting anyone, and most people would ring the doorbell. Was it

Dad? He'd forgotten his key before. That must be it. He'd finally finished work and come home hungry.

"Maybe I can ask him about the crystal." I touched the pendant in my pocket. He might know where it came from.

I loved hearing my father talk about the source of minerals and how they formed. It piqued the imagination, and getting absorbed in his talks helped me forget how much I missed Mum.

"Dad!" I said, turning the lock and opening the door.

But the thing standing outside, the thing surrounded by darkness, was not my father.

I managed a strangled squeak.

This *thing* was a black blob that seemed to meld into the night.

The silhouette alone was somewhat human in shape, but the torso was too narrow, and the limbs far too long. The feel of it was all wrong. It didn't feel human. It didn't feel like any living thing.

There was a face on the black thing's head, like a white mask. Two red eyes glared at me through the eyeholes.

Oh, why had I opened the door? This was a frightful creature, a creature which brought misfortune from beyond the veil.

I tried to slam the door, but darkness wrapped around my arm. The moment the thing touched me, a horrible chill ran through my body.

"N-no!"

I tried to call for help, but a dark hand covered my mouth. The hideous palm felt like a swarm of insects crawling over me. I wanted to get it off me more than anything.

It smelled of rot. I was plunged into darkness.

Just before I was lost completely, a blinding light enveloped everything before me.

"I told you not to bring stones home from the graveyard, didn't I?"

Mum had been humming to herself while folding laundry, but when I showed her the pretty rock I'd found, she stopped and scowled. Whenever I was in for a lecture, Mum would put one hand on her hip and glare down at me. She was very tall and extremely intimidating.

"B-but look, Mum! When the light hits it, it sparkles!"

It was small enough to fit in my tiny hand. I held it up to the light to prove its worth, but Mum's hand stayed on her hip.

"I know you like things that sparkle. I know you like rocks just as much as Mum and Dad do. But you simply must follow this one rule."

"But—"

"I'm worried about you."

Her hand wrapped around mine and around the rock. Her touch was warm and gentle.

"You're like me. You can see scary things. Scary things come after people with the sight. Maybe you aren't scared of the graveyard, but you're scared of those things, right?"

"Yeah."

I could see things other people couldn't.

There was always a rotting smell in graveyards or at the scene of accidents. Black, creepy "scary things" would be there, looking at me.

Back when I didn't know any better, I went right up to one of them. It reached out and grabbed my arm, and nearly carried me away. My mother came running and saved me. Ever since, I'd steered well clear of them.

"Your dad said the same thing, right? Stones contain the world's memories. 'Scary things' are a part of the world's memories. It's very easy for them to follow rocks around."

When she said this, I understood the mistake I'd made.

"I-I'm sorry."

Mum knelt down in front of me. Her eyes at my level, she put her arms

around me.

“As long as you understand. When the sun comes out, we’ll put the stone back, together. Until we do, make sure you don’t open the door. Got that?”

“Yes.”

I nodded, and she smiled.

“I just wish we knew a better way to handle the scary ones. Maybe we should ask a mage,” Mum said.

“A mage?”

“Yes. They know a lot more about the world than we do.”

“Dad knows a lot!”

“Ha ha. He does. But as much as he knows about rocks, he can’t see the scary ones.”

Mum flashed a smile at me. I loved it when she smiled like this, like her smile alone could frighten away the scary ones.

“Hey, Mum.”

“Yes?”

“If rocks hold the world’s memories, do they have nice ones? Fun ones?”

Mum looked surprised at my question. But then she smiled back.

“I’m sure they do. And maybe that kind of stone will protect you.”

Her gentle, reassuring words remained burned into my heart, even now. I’m sure each of the stones in the brooch she gave me was *that* kind of stone.

Reflecting back on the day, I had many regrets.

I’d completely forgotten my mother’s rule. Crystals were rocks, too, so it made total sense they would draw a scary one.

I’d taken a rock home from the graveyard and then been careless enough to open the door. If my mother had seen this, her hand would have gone right to her hip. I was thirteen! What was I thinking?

“Mum...”

I could feel soil. Smell nature. I was lying on the ground somewhere.

“You’re awake?”

A young, male voice spoke to me. I bolted upright.

I saw a rough stone wall covered in...roots? Vines? Some sort of plant. No sky overhead, just sheer rock.

This wasn’t my home. I was in some kind of cave.

It was pretty dark, but I could see despite the fact that there were no lights here.

The person standing before me was the weirdest thing of all.

A young man in a black coat looked down at me. He had even, beautiful features, but there was something robotic about them. He gave an impression of great grace, but the arms that protruded from his coat sleeves were burly and thick. He had a barrel chest, making me think he was unnecessarily well built.

But more than anything, his golden hair drew my attention.

I’m blonde myself, but this man’s hair was far more beautiful than my own.

It shone in the faint light. Not in a “pretty” way, but a powerful one, like fire or the sun. His eyes were the same shade of gold, and the light in them never wavered.

He wore a sword in a scabbard at his hip. It gave him the appearance of someone from another time, but it suited him. If he’d been wearing armor, he would have looked like someone right out of a fairy tale.

“Wh-who are you?”

“If you need a name, call me Lewis,” he said, without a trace of a smile.

“Um, well, nice to meet you, I guess? I’m—”

“I know. Felicia, right?”

“Huh?”

He said my name like it was normal he should know it. I was left looking

stupid.

“H-how do you know my name? Are you...”

A stalker? The idea floated through my mind, but I shook it off. I wasn't nearly attractive enough to have a knight like this stalking me.

“Wouldn't you rather know more about what's going on than about me?” he asked.

“Oh! I do! Please, tell me!” I nodded vigorously.

Without ever changing his expression—or his lack thereof—Lewis began to explain.

“This is the veil,” he said.

“I'm already lost.”

“A place next to the real world but cut off from it. In other words, we are both close to your home but also not.”

“That makes slightly more sense.” Well, maybe I just thought it did. I waited for Lewis to continue. Hopefully, I'd figure it out as he went along.

“You were attacked by an apparition. I saved you, along with *it*.”

He jerked his chin towards my right hand. I found I was still clutching the crystal I'd picked up in the graveyard. I'd tucked it in my pocket, so I'd been squeezing it tightly this whole time. The crystal had left a mark on my palm.

“You and this crystal saved me? You brought me here?”

“You catch on fast.”

I laughed awkwardly at this unexpected compliment, trying to look normal. But Lewis's expression never changed.

“But why did an apparition—”

“They're fixated on that crystal, so they followed you.”

I looked behind me. It was dark, but there was nothing special in that darkness. No sign of any scary things.

“And it wasn't my intention to take you here. *It* did,” Lewis said.

“The crystal?”

“That thing had the idea to bring you here.”

“Idea? Wait a second, rocks don’t have—”

“They do,” Lewis said firmly.

He stared at me, never blinking once.

I didn’t know what else to say.

“The crystal wants to go back to where it came from. It lost its master, and its function as an accessory is over. That’s why it wants to go home.”

“You mean its owner died?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I wonder if it was supposed to be buried with them? Maybe we should have buried it in the graveyard.”

“That’s not what the crystal wants. It wants to return to its home, which is why it chose to escape with you to the veil.”

And Lewis had helped the crystal do it. The crystal’s power alone hadn’t been strong enough.

“Wh-why did you save me?”

“My duty is to protect you, but I couldn’t find a place to hide you in time. So I made a deal with that crystal.”

I met his steady gaze, dumbfounded.

I tried to get the story straight. The crystal had been made into a pendant, and after its owner died, it had wanted to leave and go back home. That’s why it had taken me to this “veil.” And Lewis had borrowed the crystal’s power as a means of saving me.

There were so many parts of this I didn’t understand. Summarizing it all didn’t clear up anything.

But Lewis was the most mysterious part of all.

“So what are you?” I asked him.

“I am your protector.”

Cool. I was lost again. Every question I asked received an incomprehensible answer.

“I have been by your side all along,” he said.

The stalker vibe grew stronger.

I was old enough to be concerned about this. I wasn't at all ready to be stalked by a knight out of a fairy tale. I had my share of secrets, same as any teenager, and definitely was not up for having someone always “by my side.”

I shuddered as a warm wind brushed my back.

“Oh! Well, if you've saved me, what happened to the scary thing?”

“We were able to slip past it for the time being, but it will find us soon enough. The veil is not that far away.”

I looked behind me again and squinted, but the cave seemed to go on forever.

Darkness shrouded its depth, so I couldn't really see. But a humid breeze blew from out the cavern, stroking every part of my body. It felt like an appraisal.

“So you'll have to make a choice,” said Lewis.

“What kind of choice?”

“Whether to help *it* or return home.” Lewis jerked his chin at the crystal.

“I can go home?”

“I have enough power to return you. However, the path leading to the crystal's point of origin will never appear again.”

The crystal in my hand felt suddenly heavy. Its color became clouded, with no glitter remaining. What had happened to it? How long had it been abandoned in that graveyard?

“You said this cave was that path? Are we close to this point of origin?”

“It's true that the ‘path’ is a shortcut, but the apparition from the graveyard will pursue us. It would be safest for you to put that crystal down here and return home. If we return *it* to where it came from, perhaps the apparition will

give up. But the road there is fraught with danger.”

The scary thing was following the crystal. Without the crystal, the scary thing wouldn't come after me.

I could just abandon the crystal, leave it all alone on this weird veil path where it would yearn to go home. Terrified of the apparition that was sure to find it.

“I...”

“Which do you choose?” Lewis asked.

“I want to take the crystal back to where it came from. Poor thing.”

I tightened my grip on the crystal. Its pointy head dug into my hand and hurt, but I held it tight.

“Understood. Then I shall guard you until you reach your destination.”

“Th-thank you!”

Lewis seemed rather reliable. I still had no idea who or what he was, but his presence comforted me.

But he stared back at me reproachfully.

“Let me ask one thing.”

“Y-yes? What?”

“Why did you take the stone from the graveyard? If you hadn't, you would never have been in danger.”

Lewis put his hand on his hip as he stared down at me. He was much taller than I, so this was more than a little intimidating.

“I completely forgot. I'm sorry.”

I shrank, but Lewis did not lecture me further.

He drew his sword. The blade was the same color as his hair: golden but lacking the brightness of real gold. It had iron's roughness.

My hand naturally reached for the brooch on my chest and for the pyrite stones embedded in it.

When he saw me do this, Lewis said, “Whatever happens, don’t lose that. As long as you wear that, I can protect you.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s go.”

Lewis headed off down the “path.”

We’d only just met, and since he was so expressionless, I had no idea what he was thinking. But as he walked away, I felt like I could rely on him, like he was someone I’d known a long time.

He didn’t really feel like a prince or knight riding in on a white horse. He seemed more like...

Like an older brother.

Part of me felt like he’d been part of our family. I could almost see him sitting with Mom and Dad, saying very little and nodding occasionally.

It was an odd sensation, but I felt a strange sort of warmth in my chest. With that, I followed after Lewis.

This natural corridor seemed to go on forever.

Occasionally, the uneven floor tripped me, and tree roots tried to make me stumble. We walked a while with no end in sight. Everything looked the same.

Will this really take us where it needs to go?

I peeked at the crystal in my hand; no answers there. The murky surface did not even reflect my face.

We just kept moving further along, putting distance between the scary thing and us.

“Um, Lewis?”

“What?”

“How much farther?”

“I dunno.”

“I thought this was a shortcut, though,” I said.

"It is, but I don't know the exact distance. *It* might know more than me."

Lewis glanced at the crystal.

"But it can't talk."

"You just aren't listening. If you heighten your senses, you'll hear the rocks speak."

Was it that easy?

I stopped and held the crystal up to my ear. I listened closely, trying to hear beyond the waves of sound, but I only heard wind rushing from out the depths of the cave.

"Hmm. Doesn't seem to be working."

"Because you don't understand the right technique."

Lewis reached out his hand, his palm shockingly large and rugged. I gave him the crystal, and he spoke without even raising it to his ear.

"It says we'll have to walk a while longer. We just passed the halfway point. It's sorry for causing you hardship."

"I-It is?"

"I can't say for sure, but it does not sound like it's lying."

"That's not what I meant."

Could he really hear what stones said? He hadn't even listened closely. He'd just let it rest in his hand.

Or did "listen" mean something different to him than to me?

"What is it?" he asked.

"Er...nothing."

Lewis didn't seem like a liar. Someone as stern and uptight as him didn't appear capable of deception.

"Um, Lewis?"

"What?"

“Are you a mage?”

I’d never met a mage, but I knew such people existed.

What was common sense to a mage would be alien to us. Mages were able to borrow the power of the “neighbors.” That’s why mages could do all kinds of things we couldn’t.

That’s what my mother had told me.

Lewis stared at me for a long moment, and then said, “No. I’m not a mage. But I have been known to lend them a hand.”

“You aren’t a mage?”

Then what? I wondered.

But he just repeated what he’d said before. “I’m your protector.” Not helpful.

“Then, um, can you help me hear the stones’ voices? That way I won’t have to ask you every time.”

“No.” No hesitation. He didn’t look mad, or even the least bit sorry. Just a blunt refusal. “That is not my function. My function is to protect you.”

“Ugh, you’re so inflexible!” I said.

All I knew was his name and his purpose and my so-called quest. He’d given me the bare minimum information I needed but had shed no real light on this situation.

I bet he can hear the rocks speak because his head’s like a rock! Of course they all get along!

I snatched the crystal from Lewis and started walking again. I wanted to get this crystal to its destination and then head home. My father might be back soon, after all.

“Felicia.”

“What?”

“Walking alone is dangerous.”

Lewis spoke calmly, his voice sounding behind me. Brushing him off, I walked

even faster.

“I’m fine! It’s a straight path! And it doesn’t seem like anything’s here.”

Obedying Lewis’s commands irked me somehow. He wouldn’t tell me anything important, so I was going to solve this by myself without his help.

I couldn’t smell that rot right now, anyway.

But no sooner had I begun my minor rebellion than the path split in two.

“Ugh, gimme a break! God...”

Lewis had such long legs that he caught up instantly, without quickening his pace.

“One of these is the right path,” he said.

“I call tell that much!”

“*It* will know best.”

Lewis stared at the crystal in my hand like he wanted me to loan it to him again.

“W-wait, gimme a shot at this!”

Like Lewis had done, I put the crystal on my hand, closed my eyes, and focused my mind.

“Crystal, crystal, which way to your home?” I chanted.

Only silence answered.

“Ugh.”

“Let me have it,” said Lewis.

He quietly took the crystal from me. I thought he would just place it on his palm again, but instead, he asked, “Do you have any string? If so, may I have it?”

“String? I might have some...”

All I had was the string attached to the pendant I was wearing. When I held it out, Lewis asked, “May I take the decoration off?”

“Y-yes.”

I wasn't a big fan of this idea, but I removed it and gave the string to Lewis. He ran the string through the pendant the crystal was set in and held it out to dangle in front of me.

“Is this...”

“Use it. If you do, the crystal should make its will known.”

“I've heard of this.” I took the dangling crystal from Lewis. “Oh, right. Like a pendulum?”

“Similar. Stand in between the two paths.”

I did as I was told, centering myself at the fork. Making sure the point of the crystal hung straight down, I focused my attention on the pendulum.

“Oh!”

The crystal's tip began to sway. The swing aligned with the path to our right.

“This way?”

“If we believe what it says.” Lewis nodded.

“Wait, so I just communicated with the crystal, right?” I said, excited.

“Yes.” Lewis sounded completely unemotional.

“Wow! Even I can hear the rocks if I do this! I thought you had to be a mage!”

“You have a natural capacity to hear the neighbors' voices. If you only knew the means, you could speak to all kinds of things.”

“Would I be able to hear rocks like you do?” I asked.

“If you learn the proper method. But that is not for me to teach.”

“You're so uptight!”

I rolled my eyes at him, but I wasn't that mad this time. I understood now. Lewis would give me advice where he deemed it appropriate.

He didn't provide me with a lot of information, but maybe there was a good reason for that.

That thought made me curious about him. I'd wondered from the start, but now I was even more interested.

"So, Lewis."

I want to know more about you. Whatever you'll allow yourself to tell me.

I turned to ask, but—

"Look out!"

His arms wrapped around me, and he shoved me hard against the wall.

"Huh? What?"

His face was so close to mine. He was *very* good looking.

For a moment I was nearly swept off my feet, but the rotting scent brought me back to reality.

I followed Lewis' gaze and saw it: a being of pure black, with long limbs and a twisted body. It wore a white mask over its face, with hollow darkness staring through the eyeholes.

The scary thing.

Those long, unbalanced limbs passed right through the spot where I'd been standing. If Lewis hadn't saved me, this thing might have dragged me away again.

"Felicia. Run." Lewis grabbed my arm and pushed me. "I'll hold them off."

Them.

The scary thing hadn't come alone. Behind it scuttled several more black shapes.

"*There,*" a scary thing said, pointing its long finger at the crystal in my hand.
"*Live...want...home...*"

"You want to live inside this stone?"

Stones contained the world's memories, and the scary things were fragments of the world's memories. That's why the scary things chased after the stone. They were looking for a place to belong.

“Stones grow cloudy when exposed to corruption,” Lewis said, moving to protect me... No. To protect the stone.

“So it’s already...”

I looked down at the cloudy crystal in my palm. I could almost feel it trembling, like it was afraid of the scary things.

The scary things had surrounded it back in the graveyard. The crystal’s master had died, and it had had no one else to wear it. It would have remained forever lost.

I had to get it back where it came from.

“Want...”

The black head tilted, the figure bending over. It took me several seconds to realize it was bowing its head.

“You can’t have it!” I said, closing my hand around the crystal. “I would never let you have it! It doesn’t want you to touch it!”

The scary things let out an awful screech. I could tell that this was a howl of rage.

Scuttling around the cave, the scary things were furious, overcome with the desire to snatch the crystal from me. I knew that if I just threw the crystal at them, their hostility would dissipate. I would be able to safely get away.

But I didn’t want to do that.

The crystal was asking for help.

I was sure it had called to me in the graveyard. Its voice had reached me, somehow.

So I had to follow through.

After all, I had this strange knight on my side. If he was willing to help me, then I had to help the crystal.

It was the duty of anyone with power to help those in need.

“Felicia, the rest is up to you,” Lewis said, his sword at the ready. I gripped my brooch tight.

His gleaming sword was the same rough, golden color as my brooch. Was the sword made of pyrite?

Pyrite was a 6-6.5 on the Mohs scale. Harder than a knife.

He might be able to cut those scary things down.

“Stay sharp, Lewis!”

“Naturally,” he said, not looking back. “I am here to protect you.”

The air trembled. The scary one in front leapt forward, like a snake striking its prey. I shrieked, but a moment later it had been cut in two.

The top and bottom halves of the scary thing dissolved into black mist, leaving only Lewis brandishing his golden blade.

“Wow! That was badass!”

“Felicia,” Lewis said, neither embarrassed nor proud, just resolute. “Run.”

“Oh, right. I’ve got to get this home!”

Dangling the crystal pendulum ahead of me, I ran down the road.

A faint, foul odor wafted on the wind from behind me. Perhaps the odor came from fragments of the scary thing Lewis had cut down. Part of me wanted to see him fight, but this was not the time. I kept running.

More forks waited in the road, but the crystal pendulum told me which way to go.

Eventually, the rough path became a gentle slope. Dried leaves and grass appeared, and I could feel a breeze on my face once more.

The exit was near.

The awful feeling behind me had vanished. His blade still drawn, Lewis ran alongside to catch up with me.

“Wow, Lewis. Did you get all of them?”

“All I could see,” he said.

I couldn’t believe he’d really managed to defeat so many scary things. I glanced back over my shoulder but saw only darkness. There were no signs of

any scary things after us.

“Lewis, is the crystal okay?” I held it up.

“You’re concerned because it’s cloudy?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“If you pour cloudy water into a river, the dirt is washed away. Same thing.”

“Um, so if there are lots of crystals, it’ll be fine?”

“Yes.” Lewis nodded. Good, I was right.

If many rocks shared the corrupted memories, then that corruption would grow thin and fade away. This crystal could be beautiful again, but only if many other crystals surrounded it.

“Hmm.”

“Felicia,” Lewis said.

“Y-yes?” I wasn’t expecting him to call my name, so I inadvertently jumped to attention.

“I’m glad I was able to speak with you.”

“Erm. Where’d that come from?”

“I was never able to speak to Alicia.”

My mother’s name.

Lewis couldn’t be more than five or six years older than me, rather like a slightly older brother. But when he said my mother’s name, he seemed to speak of old memories.

He looked so sad.

“You...knew my mother?”

“Yes,” Lewis said. “Alicia was a lot like you.”

“I thought so. Dad always says I have that same spirited look in my eyes.”

“You are equally reckless.”

“The same inside and out?!” That didn’t seem like a compliment, either.

“Alicia often picked up rocks. Like you, she once picked one up in a graveyard, and Cecelia got very angry with her.”

My grandmother. Apparently the family rule about not taking rocks from the graveyard went *way* back.

Wait. Then how old was Lewis? If he’d called my grandmother by her first name, and in a way that sounded affectionate, not rude...

“Lew—Mr. Lewis,” I said, suddenly feeling I should be more polite. “How old are you, exactly?”

“I stopped counting long ago.”

Could he not be bothered? Was keeping track of his age not part of his custom? Or was he just that old?

I’d heard mages were often much older than they appeared to be, so *was* he a mage? He’d said that he helped them sometimes, so maybe he was a mage’s apprentice? One who didn’t age?

I didn’t know if that was even possible.

“Apparently recklessness is hereditary,” Lewis said, oblivious to my inner turmoil. “Alicia’s partner was rather tame, but you have no trace of that quality whatsoever.”

His tone sounded weary, so perhaps this was a roundabout way of scolding me.

“When you find yourself a partner and have a child of your own, I’m sure it will inherit that recklessness as well.”

“That’s a long way off.”

I might be a teenager, but I wasn’t with anyone. Frankly, I was much more interested in rocks than I was in dating boys my age.

“At any rate, you and Alicia were both children. Children must be taught, especially the rule about not bringing home rocks from the graveyard. I might not be able to protect you every time.”

“Lewis...”

He wasn't very expressive, but just this once, he looked deeply worried. It was like he was my older brother, my mother's older brother, and my grandmother's older brother. Those golden eyes held warmth reserved for family members.

"I-I promise." I nodded. "I won't do it again."

He spoke as if he was always protecting us, but where was he normally?

I wondered about this, but I felt like it would be wrong to ask.

"I'll be honest," Lewis said, hesitating. "When you first arrived here...if you had chosen to go directly home, you could have avoided further danger."

But I had done the opposite. I had chosen to take the crystal to its destination regardless of any personal risk.

I had no power to brush aside any danger that befell me. I had only survived this far because Lewis was with me. My actions weren't brave; they were foolish and rash.

"But I couldn't just abandon the crystal," I argued. "You didn't want to do that, either, did you?"

Lewis didn't answer.

"I knew it! Deep down, you also wanted to save it. I mean, you like rocks, too!"

"I won't deny it," he admitted. No trace of reluctance, just a simple statement of fact.

"I don't know why you're protecting me, but you should admit how you really feel. You're going to regret being so uptight about everything. Sometimes you need to forget about simply protecting me and do what you think is right," I said.

Of course, if Lewis did that, I'd be a helpless little girl in real trouble. But I didn't want him to turn his back on what he wanted to do just for my sake.

Doing so would mean he was as good as dead inside, more a thing than a human.

“Well, if I get into trouble, I’ll just grit my teeth and bear it. I got some toughness from my mother, too, you know. You do what you need to do, Lewis.”

“Felicia,” he said. His voice was quiet but with a strength that resonated through me. “I exist to protect you. If I forget that, then there is no point to me at all.”

“But that’s...”

I trailed off. I couldn’t say that wasn’t true.

Even the idea seemed like it physically hurt Lewis.

He turned his face away, like he was trying to hide the rattled look in his eyes. His resolute features suddenly seemed as fragile as glass.

Even he could look this vulnerable. I had made him look like this.

Guilt welled up inside me, like a cloud over my heart. Like a pounding rain from a gray sky come to punish me.

“I-I’m sorry.”

That was all I could squeeze out.

“No need to apologize.”

Lewis closed his eyes a moment, and his expression returned to normal. He adopted the same rough-hewn, even appearance as before.

For a while we walked without a word. I moved as quickly as I could, as if fleeing from the awkward silence. Lewis matched my pace without comment.

At last we spied the cave’s end.

“There it is!” I shouted. I took a step out of the cave and saw the stars far above us. “Wow.”

We’d come to a canyon. It was as if the earth had been split in two. You could clearly see the layers in the strata on each side. Piles of the world’s memories gathered over an incredibly long time.

“Look!” I’d found a crack in the cliff wall large enough for someone to squeeze through. It caught the moonlight, and something inside the crack glittered.

Lewis and I walked towards it. The closer we got, the more the glitter seemed to welcome us.

“This is amazing!” I cried.

Crystals filled the crack. Clusters of them covered both sides of the split.

The pendulum in my hand wavered, as if eager to join them.

I untied the string. I tried to remove the necklace as well but lacked the strength. I turned to Lewis, and he caught my drift. He tapped the fixture with the hilt of his sword.

“If you hit it too hard, the crystal might break first,” I said.

“What’s the Mohs rating for crystal?”

“Seven. Strong enough to leave a mark on steel and glass,” I recited, remembering what my father had told me.

“Then it’ll be fine.”

“Yes!”

I grinned happily. I thought I saw a trace of a smile on Lewis’s face as well.

He tapped the crystal with the hilt another two or three times. The fitting broke, freeing the crystal. Now it was no longer a man-made thing. Its life as a piece of jewelry had ended, and it was truly free.

“Look!” I said to the crystal. “It’s all your friends! How long has it been?”

I placed the cloudy crystal on top of the clear ones. I felt the cloudiness immediately begin to fade.

“Rest well.”

I rubbed the crystal, feeling like some of its glitter had returned. The moonlight winked upon it, as if saying, “Thank you.”

“I’m glad we did this.”

“Yeah.” Lewis stared down at the crystal. He seemed to have his own thoughts, but something in his expression made me hesitate to ask.

When I said nothing, he spoke of his own accord.

“That crystal lost its master. Its life as a tool ended.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know if that’s a happy ending.”

Why would you think that? After all, you aren’t a tool.

For some reason, I couldn’t say those words. I felt like if I did, he’d give me that sad look again.

“But if life as a tool has ended, it would be a misfortune not to be set free. You did well.”

“I guess so,” I murmured.

“You did.”

Lewis fell silent, his golden eyes fixed upon the crystals.

I didn’t know who he was or what was going on inside of him.

Still, I felt like I should give him this moment and decided to stay quiet until he was ready.

But then I caught a whiff of rot.

“Eep?”

I turned, and Lewis turned with me.

Darkness gathered at the cave’s entrance. No, not darkness.

The moment I perceived it, the hairs on my neck stood up. That was a scary thing.

Black body, white mask. Hollow eyes that stared at us—at the crystal clusters.

“*Want!*”

“No!”

The long arm shot forward like a snake, aimed right at the crystal. Before I knew it, I’d jumped in front of it.

“Felicia!” Lewis shouted. The scary thing’s claws pierced my chest. I felt a sharp pain and crumpled to the ground.

Lewis' golden sword struck down the scary thing. The thing dissolved, and Lewis rushed to my side.

The moon in the night sky was so beautiful, bathing the earth in its gentle light.

The crystal was safe now.

Certain of this, I slipped into unconsciousness.

"Honestly, you never do anything the easy way."

My mother had her hand on her hip. I was lying on my bed. Above me, my father looked worried.

Oh, right. This was a memory.

My thoughts were fuzzy, but I was aware of that much.

"I just wanted to save the kitten," I said. I sounded so young.

"I know! You saw a kitten in a box drifting downstream, so you jumped in the river, right? Your friends told us what happened. But what would you have done if you'd died trying to save it?"

"I don't wanna die, but I couldn't just do nothing!"

"I know. That's just who you are," my mother sighed.

She reached out and placed her hand on my forehead. Her touch felt nice and cool. Somehow I knew she was really worried about me.

"I'm sorry."

I tried to take her hand. Only then did I realize I was already holding something.

"Oh!"

It was the brooch, the one Mum had said would protect me.

"You've been clutching that thing this whole time. Maybe it's the reason you lasted long enough for me to get there."

"Mmm."

I tightened my grip on the brooch again.

“I’m glad you’re safe,” my father said, tears in his eyes.

I saw someone standing next to him.

“You really are reckless,” he said.

He had his hand on his hip, just like my mother. Was he my brother?

No, I was an only child. Besides, my parents and I all had blue eyes. Not gold eyes, like him.

“But it’s my duty to protect you despite that recklessness,” he said.

He looked down at me like he was angry, but his expression told a different story. He was almost smiling, like he was really proud of me.

It was Lewis. He’d been with me that day.

Swept away by the current, I’d clutched the kitten and managed to keep my face above water so that I could breathe.

All because someone I couldn’t see was holding me up.

“Lewis!”

My own voice woke me.

A familiar ceiling stretched above my eyes, and I lay on something comfortable.

“You’re awake, Felicia?”

A bespectacled man with a slightly timid face—my father—peered down at me. He looked a little older than he had in my dream.

“I was...”

I looked around. I was lying on my bed in my own room.

“I found you collapsed by the door. I thought something had attacked you.”

My father’s voice cracked. His eyes were red and puffy, and fresh tears started pouring down his cheeks. He rubbed his eyes to hide his tears from me, but they wouldn’t stop coming.

“Where’s Lewis?”

“Lewis?” My father looked confused.

I sat up slowly and scanned the room. I saw the desk my parents had bought me when I started school, my bookshelves. Both pieces of furniture were covered in stones my father gave me or ones my mother had left me. It was a simple room; the only other thing in it was the closet. But there was no sign of Lewis.

Had it all been a dream?

As I pondered this, I realized I was holding something in my hand. Curious, I opened my fist and found the brooch...split in half.

“What...how...”

“You’ve been gripping that ever since I found you. Maybe that amulet protected you, Felicia. I know you can see things I can’t, just like Alicia could. I’m sure it protected you from *them*.”

Oh. Right.

I knew instantly what had happened. The scary thing had come out of the darkness and reached out its claws. I’d tried to protect the crystal, but the scary thing had hit me in the chest...right where the brooch was. Instead of piercing my chest, the brooch had broken. And because I’d safely completed my quest to return the crystal, I’d been sent home.

But Lewis had vanished. Where was he now?

No.

“No. I knew all along...”

I looked down at the broken brooch in my hand, the one passed down from my mother’s mother.

This brooch had known my grandmother and my mother, and had been always at my side.

“Lewis was the brooch.”

Tears fell on the broken piece.

My dad’s eyes were still puffy, but he’d stopped weeping. These were *my*

tears. I was crying.

Would I never see Lewis again? I hadn't even thanked him. I'd wanted to talk with him some more.

The tears flowed. My father looked worried, but I couldn't stop.

Tears soaked the broken brooch, and my palm, and the sheet. My tears were like two waterfalls gushing down my cheeks. Then something reached out and touched my face.

A gentle breeze moved against my cheek like it was trying to brush away my tears.

The window was closed. So was the door.

Felicia.

A voice whispered at my ear. I turned but found only the bare white wall.

As long as you remember, I will be with you.

His sturdy hand seemed to briefly touch my own. I was sure I could sense his warmth.

"Mmm."

I clenched my teeth, forced back the tears, and clutched the broken brooch tightly.

"I won't forget you. You're part of my family."

My father looked down at me, baffled. But a few seconds later, realization dawned. He smiled gently.

Several years later.

I'd heard rumors of a mage who was good with stones. An artificer, one who specialized in magus crafts. Word was she had a shop somewhere in London.

"Sorry, this just isn't my field." My father had tried to help me find her, but this was easier said than done. "Maybe there's some special way of getting in touch with her?" he said.

"Mages are like specialists in an already highly specialized field, so... Oh well.

Thanks anyway, Dad.”

My father saw me off at the door with a sheepish laugh. My mother had once called that laugh cute, but I didn’t really get it.

“You’re going to town again?” he asked.

“Yeah. I saw another rumor online I want to check out. All my leads have come up blank so far, but mages are still human, right? The shop exists somewhere, and I’ll track it down!”

“The way you tackle problems armed with grit alone is just like Alicia.”

“Is that a compliment?”

My father smiled happily, but “grit” was hardly a word a girl my age wanted to hear.

“Why do you suddenly want to see a mage?” he asked.

I smiled. “There’s someone I want to meet.”

“Who?”

“Oh, you know. Girls my age gotta have secrets.”

“You do?”

My father looked deeply shocked. I threw my bag over my shoulder and left the house.

It was a bright sunny day, with not a cloud in the sky.

A cool breeze brushed my cheek. Conscious of the weight in my bag, I walked down the country road, wildflowers growing on either side.

I’d been saving my allowance. If I ever met a mage, I would ask to have the brooch repaired. If that wasn’t possible, I’d at least have them put it back together so I could wear it. If I didn’t have enough money, I’d work out some sort of payment plan.

And then I’d ask how to listen to the stones. How to talk to them.

Hope in my heart, I headed to town with the knowledge that he was by my side.

The End



Rainbow Day, Feast Day Hikaru Sakurai **T**here was a rainbow.

As she stepped out of the forest and onto the grass, a multicolored arc stretched across the evening sky.

Chise looked up at it as she walked.

Come to think of it, there'd been a rainbow when she left the house at noon, as well.

The wind played with her red hair. She wanted to reach up and hold her hair back, but both her hands were full.

The rainbow hung over Chise's destination, so it felt like she was walking towards it. She left the forest and strolled across the grass towards the house at the rainbow's end. It was like something out of a picture book or fairy tale. If she told Elias that, how would he react? Perhaps he would agree with her. Perhaps he would just tilt his head in confusion.

Or perhaps there would be a faint shift in the eyes that lurked within the depths of his sockets.

Are those *eyes*?

Chise wasn't entirely sure.

Still staring up at the rainbow, she hefted the burden in her hands.

Nettle, wormwood, and tetterwort constituted today's gatherings.

To gather herbs like these she had only to leave the house, cross the meadow, and enter the nearby forest. All sorts of plants grew just within its boundaries. She'd been running low on supplies for her magical studies, so she'd come to collect more.

Naturally, she had not come alone. Ruth was by her side.

A Church Grim, he was a four-legged beast, like a large dog with beautiful black fur. Also known simply as a Black Dog, Ruth was a type of neighbor that lay outside the realm of what most humans could perceive. He had made a contract with Chise to serve as her familiar. Saying she had a familiar made it

sound like she was a full-fledged mage now, but in actual practice, it was more like having a slightly older brother.

“Chise, it’s dangerous to stare at the sky while you walk,” scolded Ruth. Being a dog, his voice came from the level of her waist.

Chise nodded. “Mmm.”

Ruth might look like a dog, but he had the ability to speak with human words.

“I just thought it was pretty.”

“The rainbow?” Ruth lifted his elegantly elongated nose towards the sky. “If you wish to look at the rainbow, by all means look. But stones in the meadow can trip you, though perhaps not as many as in the woods. Should I carry those for you?”

“Thank you, but I can handle this much. I won’t stare at the sky while I walk.”

“Very well,” he said, his words mingled with very dog-like breathing.

Thanks for worrying about me.

Chise glanced down at Ruth in gratitude.

Then she looked back the way they’d come, not even conscious of why.

There was something in the forest.

A neighbor. A faerie. A spirit. Something unlike any human or animal. But it was not a bad thing. If she’d felt that certain shiver run down her spine, she’d have stopped herself before she looked. She’d felt this specific presence before.

She glimpsed two gleaming eyes, their sharp gaze directed at her.

“The flesh-clad one’s fledgling?”

A deep voice echoed.

A shadow stood at the edge of the forest, bathed in the red glow of evening.

While small, the shadow radiated strength. This was a figure of great endurance, giving the impression of a large boulder rooted deep into the earth. His shape was humanoid—well, perhaps he would take offense at that description. He was no great fan of humankind. But Chise did not believe him to

be aggressive.

The boulder-like creature staring at her from the forest's edge was a Spriggan.

A Spriggan was a guardian faerie, protector of the other neighbors. Elias had explained this once at her bedside.

"Er..."

How should she greet him?

She felt he must have some reason to show himself but did not recall speaking to him much before. Elias had been with her on their previous meeting, and the situation had been far less relaxed than today.

"The hawthorns are blooming. The wind spirits dance, riding the winds from the west. And a rainbow grants us its presence."

The deep voice came again, sounding nothing like any voice generated by human lips and throat. A unique echo, the wind carried it to her ear.

It felt like a song or a poem read aloud. Chise hesitated, unsure how to respond.

"May flowers and rainbows are both common enough," Ruth said.

"They are."

"Hmph."

Ruth had taken the lead and successfully received a response.

Her new black-furred brother was better at this than she was. Chise felt a pang of envy.

"Sorry, Chise. Did I interrupt you?"

"No, it's fine. Um, did you want something from us?" she asked the Spriggan.
Or from Elias?

She'd addressed the Spriggan with this thought in mind.

The wind blew harder, mussing her red hair.

One second. Two seconds. When no answer came, Ruth snorted and looked towards home. Chise stroked his head, waiting patiently. A full ten seconds

later, the stony figure at last spoke again.

The voice echoed but not in conversation. Once again, it seemed to chant a sort of song.

“Those who give off light. You will see the flowers’ smiles. If you have bonds and blessings enough.”

What does that mean?

Smiling flowers? Blessings? Bonds?

Chise couldn’t grasp the meaning of his words.

The rainbow soon faded from view.

By the time the setting sun turned the whole sky red, Chise and Ruth had returned home.

Home was an old two-story building. Each time she returned to it after venturing forth, Chise felt a sense of relief. She was reluctant to admit it, but the word “home” fit—at least, better than any of the places she’d lived in Japan.

“I’m home.”

As she opened the door, a faint ringing sounded in her ears.

The ringing came from a bell *she* had placed there. A pleasant sound, one that suited her quiet demeanor and presence.

Ruth entered the house as well, slipping past Chise’s feet.

“Will the herbs be fine in the shed?” he asked.

“It’s already dark. It’s still rather chilly, so I don’t think they’ll be harmed.”

“Okay.”

“Mmm.”

Removing her heavy coat, Chise inhaled the scent of home. Refreshing, but with a tang: the smell of a field. The whiff of spice mingled with what must be tonight’s supper. Chise had only gone as far as the nearby forest, but even so,

she felt like she'd returned home from a long journey.

Whether she stayed nearby like today, or went all the way to London, or crossed the sea to the Dragons' Aerie, this house always quietly welcomed her back. You could use words like "warm" or "gentle," and those would work as well, but what Chise felt most keenly was a kind of quiet, one containing both those other words.

Quiet.

That word described *her* at all times.

"....."

There was a faint rustle of clothing, and *she* came out to welcome Chise and Ruth home.

A neighbor in lavender clothes, she took the form of a woman with beautiful pink eyes. She was Silky. Elias called her the Silver Lady. Silver. She had nothing of that color about her person, yet somehow the word seemed to fit. If one were to describe her to a stranger, it would seem only natural to compare her to a silver flower.

Silky had left the kitchen to come greet them. She must have been at her busiest considering how close it was to dinnertime, but she always came to meet everyone. No matter how long they were away, she would greet them when they returned.

It was good to be welcomed by the scent of fields, and by Silky.

"Mmm." Silky released a breath, like a bird.

She spoke no words. She communicated with gestures, expressions, and, like now, with a variety of breaths. This one meant, "Welcome home."

"We're back, Silky."

Answering with a nod as she always did, Silky gestured to take Chise's coat. Chise shook her head. Intending to take it to her room, she set off down the hall and past the door to the kitchen, where the dinner table stood.

"Oh?"

Chise stopped in surprise. Her eyes widened.

She'd noted the scent of spices already. Silky could cook everything from English classics like pudding, roast beef, and pie, to dishes from across Europe. Today Chise had assumed they would be eating some international cuisine and had looked forward to it, certain it would be delicious.

But this was way beyond that.

The kitchen was in quite a state. There were far more pots, pans, and dishes than usual. Beside her, Ruth sniffed the air with his head held high. Surprise had stopped him in his tracks, too.

"A party?" he asked.

"I didn't hear about any guests."

As they stood in shock, Silky moved past them.

She bustled around the kitchen, never once hesitating or pausing to consider things. She simply did what needed to be done. She peered into one pot and nodded, added a dash of paprika to a second, checked on the oven before removing a rising pudding from the fridge. There was a flow to it, Silky's every movement as graceful as a dancer's. She used the kitchen as her stage.

She placed one dish after another on the crowded tabletop. Oh, it smelled amazing. Roast beef, roast chicken, kidney pie, Turkish scrambled eggs with loads of vegetables, borscht that didn't skimp on ingredients, paprika-laden goulash, spicy Indian-style lamb kebabs, and far more. Two pots were still lidded, and was Silky plating fried mackerel?

Silky's cooking was always delicious, and the portions generous, but today's offerings were on an entirely new level. Never before had she prepared multiple kinds of stew for the same meal. Between the chicken, beef, and pie, the oven must have had a constant rotation of dishes, but she'd still found time to bake a gratin. Since there was only one oven in the house, how could there be two ovens' worth of food so hot that steam was rising off of it? It seemed like magic to Chise, but she couldn't imagine Silky ever using magic in the kitchen. She always handled all the housework flawlessly, so even this magical feast was the product of pure skill.

“That’s quite a spread,” Ruth said, tail happily wagging.

“Amazing,” Chise said, her jaw nearly dropping.

It was clearly a special feast.

One look at the table, laid with a cloth Chise had never seen, told her that. No one could eat this much in one sitting. But no such feast had ever appeared on the winter solstice or Christmas, so why today? Was today special and she didn’t know it?

They could share this food with everyone in town and still have leftovers.

Chise had never seen some of these dishes before.

“Welcome back. Is something wrong?”

A voice echoed above her head. Chise turned around, looking up.

She paused in surprise but lingered in amazement. She knew this feeling wasn’t magic, but it somehow seemed magical. Two small eyes looked back at her, shadowed in the darkness of his eye sockets.

It was Elias Ainsworth, a very tall mage whose head was concealed by some sort of animal skull. He was the person who had shown up at exactly the right day to purchase Chise at a magical auction and take her away to live with him. “Person,” yes, but technically he wasn’t human at all. Neither was he a neighbor, like Ruth or Silky. Chise knew he was a rare creature indeed but understood little more than that. She knew him as a mage and mentor, who had taught her many things. She knew him as part of her new family.

That, and...

While they’d never discussed it in depth, one day he might be...

“I gathered the herbs. They’re in the storehouse. I’ll process them tomorrow,” Chise said.

“Well done,” he replied.

The bone face appeared to shift.

The bulk of his features were bone, incapable of showing any expression. It was difficult to read emotions on his face but not completely impossible.

Presently, Elias displayed no specific emotion. This was his default expression, as if he were observing her.

“Your coat.”

“Right, I was taking it upstairs,” she said.

“You were standing still, holding it. Why?”

“Oh.” Chise glanced back at the kitchen. “Is today a special occasion?”

“Oh, I suppose it’s about that time,” Elias said, turning towards the kitchen. He watched Silky for a moment. “There was a rainbow out?”

“Yes.” Chise remembered the seven-colored arc over the meadow.

“When rainbows appear and the wind spirits play, the Silver Lady always makes a great deal of food. I don’t know the exact reasons,” Elias said.

“Interesting.”

“I simply allow her to do what she wishes and pay no further attention.”

“I wonder if she’s celebrating something today?”

It seemed unlikely that a rainbow would appear on a specific day, but perhaps there were festivals or celebrations of which Chise was unaware.

“Hmm.” Elias looked up, thinking.

From a historical perspective, there were several possibilities. However, one rarely celebrated ancient Roman festivals or medieval wars with a feast. The greater Elias’s knowledge, the less he could explain.

“If you’re curious, perhaps you should help. When you encounter things you do not understand, close observation can offer clarity.”

Chise nodded and stepped forward.

“I’ll take the coat,” Ruth said. Chise gave it to him and volunteered to help Silky set out the dishes. Clearly, Chise had decided watching wasn’t enough and wanted to actively help.

Silky carried a plate laden with food to the table.

Next to it stood a vase of flowers she must have gathered earlier that day.

“.....”

Following Silky’s instructions, Chise turned off the flame under the pot and took the pudding out of the fridge.

As she helped, Chise watched Silky closely.

Her expression was the same as ever. Quiet, lovely, gentle.

Nothing in Silky’s face betrayed her feelings, but Chise definitely felt today was special. Was Silky happy? In a good mood? Those words floated in and out of Chise’s mind. Both were close to the truth but far enough removed that they didn’t quite fit.

Meanwhile, the food prep progressed smoothly.

It seemed they’d get through supper without answering her questions.

Chise wasn’t exactly disappointed, but it was a shame.

Then...

“♪”

A melody reached her ears.

Like a bird singing. No, not quite that.

Like a cricket chirping. No, not quite that.

Like winter mist sparkling in the sunlight, if that were a sound.

Silky hummed quietly under her breath. As she placed the plates on the table, her expression was the same as any other day.

But the color of her eyes looked different than usual.

That pale pink seemed to sparkle, as if she was enjoying herself.

A long time ago.

Before Elias came here.

Long before Chise began living in the corner room on the second floor.

A widow owned this house.

A lively, cheerful woman, she was always telling jokes and creating excitement.

Supposedly she was well into her forties, but she looked far younger. Often, the postman genuinely mistook her for someone in her twenties. Her smile lit up the empty rooms.

Her husband had been the heir to a family that had lived here for generations, but she had been born quite far away. Well, as far away as one can get without leaving England. She spoke with no trace of any regional accent. Like the house's previous owners, she and her husband had lived here together.

She had one son, a teenage boy whose strong features resembled her husband's. Once he had been prone to crying in her arms, but now he had become broad-shouldered and sturdy. Last year he had gone off to boarding school in London and rarely came home.

She must have missed him. She must have been lonely. But she never uttered a downbeat word. On chilly days she might wonder aloud if her boy was taking care not to catch a cold, but she never let her love for him cast a shadow on her face.

"Ah, it's a cold one! Yes, let's make some borscht today," she'd say.

Some nice warm food.

No sooner said than done.

The house was a little too large to live in alone, but she kept the lights shining bright. She always radiated warmth and cheer.

Did she live alone?

No, she did not.

Not many humans could see the one other person living there.

The woman, her dead husband, and her son had never noticed her, but there she was.

A neighbor who lived right next to humans. A faerie.

Yes. Silky.

“What a beautiful day! I’d better get some laundry on the line!”

On sunny days the woman’s grin would broaden, and her voice would echo through the house.

With a resident like Elias, who was fully aware of her presence, Silky was free to handle all the housework. But when the cheerful woman had lived there, Silky had contented herself with helping in ways that would not be noticed. She would carry the basket of freshly washed clothes closer to the laundry lines. She’d find handkerchiefs that had fallen through the gaps in the closet shelves and wash them, or keep the clothes from flying away when the wind tried to sweep them off the line. When the widow got so caught up in laundry she forgot to do the dishes, Silky would wash a few for her.

Bit by bit. Here and there.

At first, Silky lived with the woman just as housekeeping faeries have always done, just as she had done when the woman’s dead husband had been a child. She helped with the housework in ways that might surprise the owner and seem a little strange, but would never raise suspicion.

Silky believed she would do the same for the next generation.

“My! When on earth did I wash the dishes?!” the widow would cry out.

Then one beautiful, calm day when the wind spirits weren’t fussing, the woman found some work Silky had done. She blinked at it a moment.

“I declare, it must be the faeries’ doing. Ah ha! I’ll have to thank them.” The woman laughed out loud. “It would never do to admit I completely forgot it now, would it? Yes, much better to believe the faeries helped. They do good work, these faeries. So thank you very much, good faeries!”

Words of gratitude, given with a smile. A booming voice that echoed through the house like she was speaking to someone on the second floor.

Perhaps because the widow did not see anyone nearby, she assumed they must be upstairs.

But at that moment, Silky was standing next to the couch, not five feet from the woman. Silky’s eyes widened. The woman couldn’t see her or any

neighbors, and the way she spoke made it clear she had no strong belief in faeries. Yet it was so rare to be addressed directly that it caught Silky by surprise.

She'd been told the people who lived here kept faithfully to the old ways. But with the husband dead, and the son away at boarding school, the wife from distant lands wouldn't know their ways.

"....."

Silky knew.

She knew the woman could not hear.

But for the first time, Silky spoke to the woman. *You're welcome*, she said.

The next morning, she found a cup filled with cream above the fireplace. She had not been given a gift like that since the late husband's mother passed. Silky was so surprised that she made quite a spectacle of herself, but we won't discuss that here.

The best thank you for a faerie that helps with the housework was a bowl of milk or cream. Silky was no exception to this rule.

"Now, what shall we make today?"

The woman always laughed off the small things, setting her eyes on the big picture. She became a great cook, with surprising finesse and a diligence matched only by her curiosity. She soon mastered local specialties like roast beef, pies, and pudding; German methods to make her own sausage; French cooking, including making her own bouillon; Hungarian cooking with its surprisingly versatile use of paprika; even Chinese and Indian dishes that used spices like magic. She prepared dishes from distant and little-known countries, and on more than one occasion Silky found the kitchen in complete disarray.

The widow made all kinds of dishes every day, thoroughly enjoying herself in the process.

The woman's late husband had probably left her a sizable sum of money. She'd never had a job, and Silky had heard nothing about the woman's own family being well-off. Now, it seemed the woman had decided to pour all her

time and money into cooking.

Silky, too, knew how to make many local dishes, but foreign food was different. Every day, she stood at the woman's side while she cooked unfamiliar food and listened to her share a wealth of information about it.

For example, curry.

Strictly speaking, curry and rice.

"Everyone thinks curry is Indian food, but curry and rice actually isn't! Making a curry from leftover roast beef and serving it on a plate of rice is apparently an English innovation."

The woman talked to herself a lot.

Standing in the kitchen, surrounded by spices, an incredible smell rising from the simmering pot, Silky listened and nodded.

"These days people have stopped making it at home, which seems like such a shame! I suppose you can get proper Indian curry at restaurants run by real Indians, so why bother making it yourself? But there's no faster way to kill a culture than to give up on it, I always say."

When she was talking about food, her monologues got even longer.

"Right, right! I heard real curries come in endless varieties. I'll have to try some of them next time! I read real Indians make several different curries for a single meal, and each person mixes and matches to their own tastes, I think. If you mix in some chutney, it's even better. Where did I hear that? Or did I read it somewhere?"

There was no one to hear but a faerie and no one around to stop her, so she just kept on talking.

"Well, next time is next time. Today we're doing curry and rice! If there are leftovers, we'll eat those tomorrow!"

No one person could eat that pot of curry alone, so there were always leftovers. Was it just the woman's habit to think out loud? Or was she, on some instinctive level, aware that Silky stood beside her? Most likely the former. Perhaps some humans believed so strongly in faeries that, when faced with

strange or inexplicable things, they would simply address those faeries. Yet even if this widow believed, the unshakable fact that *she could not see* was a huge obstacle. Even if one could overcome it, the sight would make it that much harder for someone to function in human society.

So Silky never made a sound. Just stood by quietly.

She continued to help with the housework and took pains not to be noticed. She always did things that could be easily dismissed as the imagination, or absentmindedness, just as she had ever since taking up residence in this home. At the moment, she quietly added a few items to the table setting the woman had forgotten.

“Mmm, smells lovely. Must be almost ready!” the woman said, looking satisfied.

Silky nodded in agreement.

There was so much time.

As if to prove it, the woman began leaving the house for days or weeks at a stretch.

Perhaps she had found herself a job of some kind or was taking some sort of business trip. At first, Silky assumed as much, but this was not the case at all.

Each time the woman returned, her cooking repertoire had increased.

The woman wasn't a mere cooking enthusiast; she would leave the house to travel and learn new ways to cook. She tried all kinds of new foods on her trips and learned how to make those dishes. Silky enjoyed the lonely days spent watching over an empty house more when she could look forward to the woman's return.

“.....”

While the woman was out traveling, Silky kept the house clean and tried not to make it seem too strange.

She would have preferred to leave not a speck of dust remaining but controlled herself. She kept things to a level where the woman would not be horrified when she returned. There was dust but not so much that it would coat

a person's finger if they touched it. Achieving the right level of dust required careful rounds of cleaning and neglect.

Days passed like this.

Occasionally, an unusual guest would visit, always at sunset.

He normally sent letters via the centaur post, but when the woman was away on her trips he would show himself. A forbidding, stony presence, but a kind protector, the Spriggan always brought flowers with him. Silky usually found him standing a short distance from the back garden.

He never tried to enter the house.

He would not even set foot on the grounds, avoiding both back and front yards. He would stand at the edge of the meadow, on the border between the wild and civilization, calmly watching. Silky never tried to coax him inside.

He came again that day, moving upwind at the edge of the meadow.

"The lady is out again?" he asked.

"Mmm." She gave a nod and a short breath.

Silence followed. Only the wind blowing from hill to meadow made any sound.

They did not require words.

Silky did not know how to express in human words what lay between her and this protector, and she did not attempt to figure it out. She had once been a banshee—and this stony fellow had saved her when she had lost her home and was wandering.

Sometimes he sent her letters.

Sometimes he gave her flowers.

And sometimes he came to see her.

"Are you comfortable here?"

She nodded. She was fine. It was a good home.

Naturally, none of the family knew he existed. Like Silky, ordinary humans

were unable to see him. They had no way of knowing that invisible faeries were discussing whether or not to live in this house, without ever asking how the humans felt.

“.....”

Silky nodded again. She handed over the basket she'd made for him.

Biscuits. She had felt he would be here soon, so she'd made them that morning. She was reluctant to use the oven while the owner was away, but lately the widow never finished off the milk before going on her trips. Silky took advantage of these mistakes to make pastries.

But making biscuits every time didn't seem to be enough.

If he would just stay longer, she could make something even better.

“I will not stay long on cultivated ground. Sorry. I am grateful for these. The food you make is always filled with generosity.”

“.....”

She reluctantly nodded.

The protector of the hills was a man of few words, so this was the highest compliment.

A few days later, the woman returned in the afternoon, seemingly flustered. She hurried along, her cheeks flushed, a strong light in her eyes. What had happened? Even if there was no one around, the widow was the sort to talk aloud eventually. At first, Silky watched and waited.

But the woman said nothing.

Ruffled, without even stopping to unpack her heavy travel bag, she headed straight for the kitchen.

She checked the flour and spices in the cupboard, then turned on her heel and went out again without locking the door. She returned laden down with shopping bags.

“Right! Time to cook!” she said, all worked up.

Then she made a huge volume of dishes in massive quantities, one after

another without a single break.

Roast beef and roast chicken, kidney pie, so much haggis she stuffed a pie and put the rest on a pizza. Eggs scrambled Turkish style with onions and shishito peppers; borscht simmered and simmered until it was ever so thick; goulash using a blend of different paprikas she'd bought on her travels; Indian lamb skewers marinated in onions, green chilis, bay leaves, cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, turmeric, cumin, and cayenne; and a pudding on top of all that. This was far more than she could ever hope to eat by herself in a single day.

It was too much.

It was clear she didn't have the energy to make it all, let alone eat it.

Her trip had worn her out. Combined with the rush to the grocery and then a several-hour battle in the kitchen on top of that...

"Whew. This sure is taking it out of me."

Of course it was.

As the sun set, she collapsed onto the table and was snoring in seconds. She would have been mortified to be seen like this. With no idea what was going on, Silky could only watch over her. The woman's sleep did free Silky up to finish off any bits of leftover work, which was a relief.

Silky watched a pot still on the flame and took the chicken out of the oven before it burned.

She put a shawl over the tired woman's shoulders.

"....."

She said nothing.

Just felt a need to pay her back.

The woman had to be exhausted—she would not wake until late that night. Normally, Silky would have stopped anything from burning or catching fire but otherwise left it at that. But clearly the woman had been working this hard for something, and Silky did not want that to go to waste. As exhausted as the woman was, a few strange things might pass without her noticing.

So...this was Silky's chance.

A faerie's chance to shine, she thought.

While the owner slept, the kind faerie finished her work.

Rather like the fable about the neighbors who lived with the shoemaker.

The woman awoke to find that while she'd slumbered, someone had finished her feast. Steam rose from the hot dishes, the smells so good they made the stomach growl. The dish she'd left in the oven and the one on the stove hadn't burned to a crisp. In fact, they were flawlessly completed.

She had no memories of finishing either, but there they were on the table.

"Wow," she said, amazed.

Silky was secretly relieved that the woman wasn't shocked or confused.

Even without words she could understand, much like with the stony protector. The woman was astonished, but overjoyed and delighted as well.

"I knew we had a brownie here! Golly. I could never have finished everything this well myself. I knew when I started that I'd mess up at least a few of the dishes!"

Ah ha.

A moment later, the look of surprise vanished. With a big, broad smile, the woman said, "I'll have to leave an extra-large cup of cream on the fireplace."

Silky nodded.

"Well, then let's dig in! This all looks wonderful. If there's anything left over, we can eat it tomorrow or share with the neighborhood!"

She took two glasses from the back of the china cabinet and set them out.

Two glasses.

Could she see Silky?

Silky frowned. That couldn't be. The woman could not see neighbors. The only postman she ever saw was the human one; she had never once noticed the centaur post, or the woolybugs flying by in spring, or the ariel dancing in the

wind. She'd never once made eye contact with Silky.

Oblivious to Silky's confusion, the woman filled both glasses with wine.

"One for me, and one for him."

"....."

Oh. Okay.

That explained it.

It was as if the strings holding Silky stiff went slack.

The anniversary glasses. One of them had belonged to the woman's late husband. Silky remembered him as a child. How happy he'd seemed when he married this woman. How sad he'd appeared when sickness took his parents and the look of joy that returned when his son was born.

This mountain of food...the woman hadn't made it all for herself.

No.

"Look! The feast I promised! It came to me in a flash but I managed to pull it off! Mmm! Thanks to the faeries! I remember you told me, dear. 'This is an old house. It likely has a faerie or two about it,' you said."

A promise. The feast day. Don't forget. Silky remembered.

Once the woman had promised her husband, "On your next birthday, I'll make you the most amazing feast you've ever seen."

He'd been gravely ill at the time and had not lived to see his next birthday. But the woman had kept her promise: she always made a grand feast on his birthday, one filled with dishes he had never eaten.

But one thing struck Silky as odd.

It wasn't the right day. His birthday was still six months away.

"Today isn't your birthday, I know," the woman said, as if answering Silky's question.

Silky leaned in, looking closely at her face.

"But...what does that matter?"

The woman raised the glass and tapped it against the other one.

“This morning, I came home. And the moment I saw the house, I just thought to myself, today’s the day. I mean, there was the most beautiful breeze blowing...”

I mean, there was the most beautiful breeze blowing...

And a rainbow stretched over the meadow.

And the hawthorn bloomed all along the road.

You loved all those things. So did I, but you loved those things in particular.

Rainbows. The wind. Hawthorn flowers.

So I made up my mind. I was going all in to make the best meal.

It’s hardly enough doing that only once a year and always on your birthday, isn’t it?

I’ve thought that before, and today was just the day to begin.

I overdid it a little bit, so I’ll have to be a bit more careful next time. I promise!

But you don’t mind, do you? When the wind is dancing about, and the rainbow comes from over the hill...that’s a special day, isn’t it? Not a day history decided was special, just a day you feel is special in your heart.

You wonder what the day will be like, what tomorrow will bring.

Tonight’s meal?

I didn’t finish all of that. I’m sure the house faerie helped with it.

I wonder if you’d have liked it.

Or if you’d have said the poached eggs you ate every morning were the best, after all. Oh, I’m sure you’d have done just that.

But that’s just you being you.

I love cooking. Cooking for you. Cooking for myself. Cooking for our growing boy, not that he ever shows his face around here.

Isn't that what happiness means?

So, cheers!

Oh, this is lovely. Let's eat before the food gets cold.

This isn't the last one, you know! I've got to keep up my strength!

Build up my repertoire for the next feast!

After that, the woman continued making a great number of dishes.

Silky learned the recipes, watching and helping where she could.

For many years, that knowledge did not have its chance to shine.

Until time passed and the home changed hands. Until an owner who could see neighbors, Elias, became master. At long last, Silky began to show what she could do in the kitchen, leading Elias to label her the housekeeper. At first, Silky always prepared English food.

After all, she wasn't sure what Elias was, much less where he came from.

She had no way of knowing what he liked or disliked, so preparing local food seemed like the safest choice.

Then, one day, she found a book of international recipes sitting quietly in the corner of the kitchen. Elias must have left it there. He could change his appearance to look like a human, but it seemed highly doubtful that he would have gone to a bookstore and purchased it. More likely he'd enlisted the help of Father Simon.

Either way, Silky had elected to take the hint.

Some time after that, Chise had joined the household, a wife who ate Silky's food with clear reactions and specific feedback...

"Well, Chise. Should we eat?" Elias asked.

"Yes."

Chise and Elias faced the feast.

Elias sat at the head of the table, with Ruth next to him. Silky stood silently by—she never consumed anything beyond a little cream or milk. During meals she would carry dishes to and from the kitchen or stand by if needed.

When Chise looked at her, she gestured for Chise to dig in.

“Thank you.”

First, Chise took a bite of the chicken she’d helped carve.

It was savory, just the right texture.

Really good.

Chise looked up to say as much, but...

She paused, sensing something more. It wasn’t just the taste and flavor. A strange sensation spread through her entire body. Had a spell been cast on the food? She didn’t think so. This wasn’t anything supernatural but something much deeper. She felt she could best describe it in images, but nothing concrete came to mind.

It was something warm. Comfortable.

Something instilled in every dish on the table.

She felt it was true but that there was still more to it.

Oh, I knew it.

This was special.

Maybe it was the food, or maybe it was a day with a rainbow and dancing spirits. Maybe it was both. Either way, this was special to Silky.

Two bites. Three. Chise could taste it in the food. She wasn’t sure if she should ask Elias about it or if she only noticed because she was a sleigh beggy.

But she knew.

Faintly. Gently.

Something was in this.

A strange feeling of acceptance. Part of her still wanted to know more, to know the reason, but no...she didn’t need to dig that up.

After all, she was here with Elias, with Ruth, and with Silky. They were with her. They were eating good food together.

That was enough.

There was no need to put it into words.

No need to ask Silky. Some things didn't need to be asked.

Oh. But she had to say one thing, to make one thing clear.

"Silky. It's really good. Thank you."

She needed to put her emotions into words.

A moment later.

"....."

The silver lady nodded like a tiny flower, bashfully blooming, bowing its head in the morning mist.

Chise rubbed her eyes, sure she'd seen a trace of a smile on Silky's lips.

A moment later Elias asked for more water, and Silky's face was as it had always been: quiet, calm, and kind.

The End



Defender and Ash

Sakura Satou

The humid air weighed heavy on her, and with every step she felt like she was sinking deeper into the damp meadow. The air was so thick she could almost part it with her hands. The rotting stench on the wind made her ill.

The trees that surrounded the swamp were spindly things yet not a scrap of sun was visible. Oppressive clouds had covered the sky before she even entered the forest.

Her wand hand sweated with tension. Her pulse raced.

“Ashley.”

As she grew dizzy, a voice called her name. She turned, and a well-dressed young man—far too nicely groomed for this dank forest—stared back at her, his head bowed. The gentle wave of his hair was bound loosely in back, and with his fur-trimmed parka he’d have looked entirely at home walking the streets of London.

He stared at her with eyes like wet obsidian and called her name with a strangely powerful voice that carried well. That was all it took to calm her.

Her partner asked if she was all right, and she nodded. Adjusting her grip on her ash wand, she took a deep breath. She was fine. Pursing her lips, Ashley turned back towards the swamp.

On a clear autumn afternoon, the gancanagh saw a figure walking along the edge of a deserted pasture. He put out his pipe and headed over. Even from a distance he could tell it was a woman.

He had not met a human woman in these parts in quite a while. One too many cases of a dangerous man assaulting them, and the number of women walking alone through deserted fields and forests had dwindled away to nothing. Seducing women was a gancanagh’s nature, so in human terms this put him right out of business.

As he got closer, he saw she was quite young. Mid-to-late teens. Encouraged,

he called out to her in honeyed tones.

“Wee lass, where you off to all alone? This is a dangerous area.”

He planned to lure her into the deserted forest by feigning concern for her well being, but a laugh like the winter wind upended his plans.

“Ha ha, a gancanagh? My first time seeing one of your kind,” she said.

The girl turned around, her cloak’s hood pulled deep over her eyes. Her tone was completely unrattled. Only now did the gancanagh realize what she was.

She shouldered a rucksack from some distant time, with both an ancient incense lamp and a wand fastened to it. The scent of herbs wrapped protectively around her.

“Ach, a mage?”

Now that he’d identified the girl, he could clearly sense the magical power emanating from her. How he had not noticed before?

The young mage chuckled.

“You didn’t notice? I always thought your penchant for luring young women to their deaths was rather brutal, but it seems you’re more of a fool,” she said.

He considered getting angry at the insult but sensed no hostility in her tone.

“But you’d even hit on someone like me? I suppose human standards of beauty hold no meaning to a faerie.”

The girl looked up at the gancanagh, a hint of bitterness in her tone. Only now did he get a clear look at the face beneath the hood.

The face itself was not unattractive, but a nasty burn decorated the right side from her eye to her ear. The skin was a dark, leathery red. She was clearly still young, but white-flecked hair spilled from out her hood. A human would likely pity the poor young thing or be repulsed, but the scar did not draw the gancanagh’s attention.

Her eyes did. They were strange. The irises were an ordinary brown, but something about them reminded him of a dark stormy sea, a shudder beneath a calm exterior, a hollow lurking within. Those eyes seemed to suck him in, to give

the strange sensation he was falling forever.

On the verge of being unable to tear his gaze away, the gancanagh shook his head and broke eye contact.

“What’s a mage doing here, then? That way leads to a forest and a marsh that neither human nor neighbor dare enter,” he said.

The marsh had long been there. Humans loathed it, called it cursed.

“Yes, that’s where I’m going.”

This surprised him. He looked the girl over again. She was certainly a mage, but he did not think her a particularly experienced one. Some mages possessed centuries of knowledge, but she likely had far less than that. Less than a decade’s worth, in all likelihood. Meanwhile, this marsh had been considered dangerous since ancient times. For a rookie mage to go in alone was tantamount to suicide, and she did not even have a familiar with her.

The hollow lurking in her eyes didn’t suggest the kind of ambition that would risk everything for glory, so why would she go somewhere so dangerous? He couldn’t begin to imagine.

“At your level, heading there is like marching off to die,” he said.

The fae considered mages to be like them, yet that did not mean the fae took an interest in mages’ actions. He had neither reason nor right to stop her, yet he felt strangely moved to warn her.

The girl laughed.

“Now there’s a shock! Never took the gancanagh for busybodies.” She’d clearly got the message not to go, and still she laughed. Either she was confident, or... “I know the horror of that place well. I’ve been here before.”

That was a surprise. She’d foolishly charged in once before and with even less experience? Or had her master shadowed her that time? Either way, she seemed disinclined to back off now. That was all he could do. Warning her in the first place had been more than kind. The gancanagh shrugged.

“Then do what you like.”

“I will. Thanks for the warning, though.”

With that nod to politeness, the young mage began walking again. He watched her go, his eyes drawn to the size of the large rucksack on her back. It was like the rucksack itself was walking. Unable to take his eyes off it, the gancanagh watched until the rucksack disappeared into the forest.

Alex lived on the road, mostly. Everything she owned in the world was crammed into her old rucksack or in the gunny bag she had slung over her shoulder. Her rucksack alone was pretty heavy, and the straps of it dug into her shoulders. She was used to the weight after all these years, but that didn't change just how heavy it was.

Added to that, the air in the forest had a heaviness of its own, a sticky, unpleasant denseness. Though the sun should still be high in the sky, the forest was dark enough to suggest twilight. This place was as gloomy as ever.

She wiped the sweat from her brow, her hands chilled by the tension. Her fingers trembled. Still, considering last time she entered this forest she'd immediately keeled over, this was progress.

That had been a long time ago, maybe a year or two after she'd run away from home and started teaching herself magic. She'd wanted to prove she could do something, prove to herself she wasn't without talent. When she'd heard about the cursed swamp, she'd headed right to the forest around it.

The forest had many legends.

They said a monster that ate human souls lived in the marsh. Faeries of death gathered there. When plague or war or calamity broke out, the entire forest would weep. In the oldest stories, it was said that ancient peoples used to offer sacrifices to an old god. The monster in the marsh was what that old god had become.

Many who approached the forest found their health deteriorate. Some saw strange, inhuman shadows around the forest at night. Cursed forests like the Dering Woods in Kent or Hoia Baci in Romania were famous the world over. This place was not as well known, but the locals feared it. None went near the place by light of day, much less at night.

Yet every year, several people entered the forest and perished. Mostly, these people were hoping to die. Rumor had it the forest possessed a mystic power

that lured in those who longed for death. This frightened people even more.

The souls of those who perished in the marsh roamed its edges for eternity, calling to those who wished to die. Or their souls became a part of the monster when it ate them. Either way, a fledgling mage could not emerge from this place intact.

It had been a foolish choice.

In the end, Alex had never made it to the marsh. She'd gone a few yards into the forest, then turned tail and fled. Someone with her inexperience couldn't hope to conquer this place. She'd been overwhelmed with shame and regret.

Returning after all this time only reminded Alex of how powerful the marsh was. But she wouldn't flee this time.

Why would Ashley come to a place this terrifying?

Unlike Alex, her sister had been studying under a real mage. She'd known full well this place was out of her league.

But one stupid letter...

Alex found a clearing in the trees and set her bag down. She'd come the bulk of the distance here on foot to conserve money and was feeling the miles. She needed to be at full strength before reaching the marsh. She would camp here for the night and head for the marsh in the morning.

Alex gathered the driest kindling she could find, produced paper and matches from her rucksack, and lit a fire. She pulled out several small bags, chose one tied with a green ribbon, and put the others away. The bag was filled with dried Saint John's Wort, which had the power to ward off evil. As the fire came alive, she tossed the dried leaves onto it.

She'd picked the herbs at the right time on a moonlit night. She'd emptied her savings, buying as many expensive magic-imbued minerals as she could afford. For the first time ever, she'd asked an artificer for something made-to-order.

She knew full well her abilities as a mage were dubious at best. She'd never found a proper teacher and was mostly self-taught. She'd run into another mage at a pub once who'd bluntly told her she'd die young if she kept this up,

but he hadn't offered to take Alex on as an apprentice.

Truly, she enjoyed learning. She'd met her share of mages, and several of them had spent a few hours giving her pointers, but never once had her apprenticeship lasted. Alex knew full well she didn't have the kind of talent that would make someone want her as an apprentice, so she felt she couldn't very well ask. She didn't want to endure the pain of not being chosen, the humiliation of it, the sadness.

She sat close to the fire, chewing on some bread she'd bought in town, and watched the darkness beyond the flames. The air was sometimes chilly, sometimes lukewarm, always stifling. It was like something below was trying to pull her into the earth.

Fear coated the area. She rubbed her well-used, cracked wand, enduring the tension...and before she knew it, it was morning. She had not slept for very long. The fire still burned.

The forest was dark even in daylight but not as bad as it had been at night. Feeling slightly better, Alex stood, stretching her limbs. She hadn't slept much, but she rarely did. Her fatigue had ebbed considerably.

She ate the rest of the bread, gaining strength. Putting out the fire, she stowed the bag with clothes and things safely away. She placed only what she needed in the gunny bag on her shoulder. Taking a firm grip on her wand, Alex headed deeper into the forest.

She checked her course on a compass, but there was some magnetic interference; the needle refused to pick a direction. She gave up and put the compass away. Instead, she headed towards the unpleasant thickness in the air, forcing herself onwards as her body begged her to flee.

No matter how long she walked, the view never changed. Twisted trees loomed on every side. A mist swirled through the forest, and she could barely see ten meters in front of her. The air grew heavier the farther in she went.

She must have walked for an hour. At last the air grew so thick she felt nauseated. Only then did the trees around her begin to change. Thinner, and with scarcely any leaves, they resembled devil's pitchforks sunk hilt-deep in the ground. Beyond these trees, she saw the marsh.

So little light broke through that the marsh's surface was dark and viscous. The stench in the air smelled like rot and turned the stomach. Alex had to scold herself several times just to make it to the marsh's edge.

The second she arrived, Alex shrieked and took a step backwards.

Her sight was not that strong. She could see faeries that wanted to make contact with humans, like the gancanagh she'd met yesterday, but was not good at discovering any fae who attempted to remain hidden. However, she was pretty good at *hearing*.

The marsh was so dark that even if something inhuman had been out there, Alex would not have seen it. But she could *hear* something, a rustling sound, like a large insect scuttling. Groaning voices echoed resentment.

She didn't know what it was, but there was something in this marsh like the rumors said. Something absolutely, unbearably terrifying. Whatever it was held the souls of the dead prisoner...

Alex resisted a sudden urge to turn on her heel and flee. A cold sweat poured down her face. She couldn't run away now. Her resolve renewed, she tightened her grip on her wand. She sensed a presence behind her and spun around. Before she could discern what it was, heat blazed across her left shoulder.

She removed her right hand from her wand and touched her shoulder. Her fingers came away bloody. She stared at her hand in wordless horror, as the mysterious assailant came at her again. She caught the dull gleam of a blade as it sped by.

Her mind went blank. She couldn't get a good look at who it was, but it seemed human, probably male. Dodging the wild swings of the knife, Alex thrust out her wand and shoved him back.

“.....”

She tried to concentrate and chant a spell, but there was an awful cracking sound. She shut her mouth. She'd never felt anything like this before; something was terribly wrong. A moment later the wand in her hands, the wand Alex had used so long it felt like part of her own body...shattered.

If it had just broken, that would have been one thing. This was nothing so

natural. The wand literally turned to dust. No remaining splintered piece was bigger than a five pence coin. The shards fell and scattered on the damp ground.

Stunned into silence, Alex stared down at the wooden debris in her hand, the pieces littered around her feet. A knife's slash across her belly jolted her into action.

This slice was much deeper and broader than the cut on her shoulder. Blood poured from the wound. She tried to stop the bleeding with her hand, but it was too much. Her assailant still pursued her. He backed up several steps, and as Alex fell to her knees he charged wildly towards her, swinging the knife.

Alex looked up at the man, heard his inhuman shriek, and quickly shoved her hand in her bag. Her fingers touched the hilt of the single most expensive item she'd brought, a silver ceremonial knife. She pulled the leather scabbard off with her teeth and thrust the blade towards the man.

She missed his brow, but the knife sank deep near his collarbone. Howling like a wild thing, the man doubled over and grabbed the knife's hilt. He tried to pull it out but couldn't. Screaming in agony, he hobbled off into the depths of the forest.

Horrific pain soon replaced the flood of relief. Her stomach wound would not stop bleeding. Fighting the pain, Alex used the bag in an attempt to staunch the blood. As if sensing Alex's weakness, the swamp's unpleasant air grew thicker, like it was trying to swallow her.

Alex scrambled away from the swamp, clutching her throbbing wound. She would have to treat it somewhere safer.

She couldn't die here. Not yet.

But as she passed through the row of scraggly trees, Alex lost consciousness.

"I heard you accidentally hit on a mage!"

The gancanagh was aimlessly wandering the field and enjoying the warm sunlight when someone called out to him. He spied a leannán sídhe—a faerie that lived off human men—perched near the riverbank.

“You’re so dumb!” she added.

This made the third time this morning someone had laughed at him for his error. So few humans visited this area that the local fae must have been simply starved for gossip.

Still, just how far had the story spread in a single day?

The other faeries’ mockery annoyed him, but in truth he was far more pissed at himself. How in the hell had he not noticed the girl was a mage before speaking to her?

“Maybe your instincts are dull because it’s just been so long since you met a human?” the faerie asked.

“Maybe,” he said, controlling his irritation.

The leannán sídhe let it drop, nodding. “You really don’t see any human women walking around here these days. Isn’t there some crazy murderer on the loose? I could never love a man like that. No artistic sense at all!”

Her love was always fatal. This faerie granted artistic talent in exchange for the artist’s life.

She sighed. “Someone claimed they saw a weird human in the forest.”

“Really?” he said.

“*The* forest. The one even *we* don’t like going near. But apparently a human man was wandering around like he lived there. Maybe he’s the killer. Why would anyone ever want to live in such a place? There’s something wrong with that one. Just having humans like that around is such a bother. Are you listening?”

He’d stopped listening to the leannán sídhe’s endless griping halfway through her speech. The gancanagh stared at the forest, listening intently.

“Did you hear that?” he asked.

“What? The birds?”

“No, a human.”

“Of course I didn’t. There’s no one here but you and me.”

The leannán sídhe was right, but he was sure he'd heard something. The thought hastened his steps.

“Hey! Come back!”

Ignoring the leannán sídhe, he ran towards the forest as fast as he could. Normally, the gancanagh would never venture near the place. As he approached, the clear sunny day became inexplicably gloomy. Entering the forest, an unpleasant chill assailed him even though it wasn't cold. Like being surrounded by despicable iron, the chill went all the way to his core.

He had no reason to continue. Enduring this discomfort was hardly worth it, yet the gancanagh raced through the dark forest as if being chased. He gritted his teeth against the sickening discomfort. He didn't know where he was going but was certain he needed to get there.

As he reached the marsh at the heart of the forest, the place he least wanted to go, the gancanagh spied what had called to him.

“The mage!” he cried.

The young mage girl he'd met the day before lay on the ground, bleeding from a belly wound. Unpleasant things gathered around her.

He quickly picked up the blood-drenched girl, brushed aside the clustering things, and ran for a safe place.

She'd first met a mage in the autumn when she was five. She was playing with her sister in the garden when she felt someone staring at her. Looking up, she discovered a strange woman standing on the other side of the hedge, watching the sisters play.

“My, you both have the gift. Even though she had none!” the woman said.

Bright red lips and lots of makeup, flashy clothes—it was hard to tell her age. The two girls had never met her, but she behaved as if they had, saying she would teach them magic. And she did. From that day forth, she'd show up in the garden sometimes and teach the girls the basics of magic. They grew to love these secret lessons and eagerly awaited the woman's visits.

They only discovered the woman's true identity on the day their mother came

out to call them for dinner.

The second she saw the woman with her daughters, her smile faded. She turned quite pale and yelled, “What are you doing here, Doris? Stay away from my children!”

Livid, she ran over and hid the girls behind her, staring down the flashy woman. Faced with the mother’s anger and protectiveness, the woman just shrugged.

“Sophie. They’ve got the gift, unlike you. It’s such a waste!”

Their mother glanced back at the girls with a look of surprise but soon faced the woman again. “That’s enough, Mother! You won’t make a mess of our lives anymore! We want to live normally! We just want to be happy. Don’t you ever show yourself here again!”

With that, she dragged the girls into the house and slammed the door.

Their mother had always harbored a strange hatred for magic and wizards. She wouldn’t even allow her daughters to read picture books with witches in them. Alex and her sister only understood the reason for her anger when Doris started teaching them.

Doris was something of a free spirit. Even when Sophie had been young, Doris would leave on a whim, then return home just as suddenly before turning the house upside down. Sophie had more or less grown up an only child, just her and her father. When Sophie got married and had Alex, Doris was no less selfish. Occasionally, she’d show up at her daughter’s door, doing whatever she pleased. Eventually Sophie’s husband had had enough of this self-proclaimed mage who never appeared to age and who never listened to him. Just before their second daughter was born, he blew up.

Doris’s visit had led to a furious argument and divorce. Several years passed, and Sophie had remarried. She’d thought her mother would never come around again. But not only had Doris come around, she’d filled Sophie’s girls’ brains with all sorts of nonsense. Sophie couldn’t believe it.

The girls were told in no uncertain terms they were never to speak to that woman again, never listen to a word she said. Their mother was so scary that

they both promised, but it was too late. Alex and Ashley had become enraptured by the strange world they'd never heard of or touched before.

After that, Doris continued to visit them in secret, teaching them the basics of magic. When her grandchildren started to read, she gave them books of magic and herb cultivation that would have proven difficult enough for a grown-up to understand. The girls battled gamely through the books, remembering and putting their contents into action. Alex did well in school, studying a great deal just to be able to read the magic books. In an unkempt corner of the garden, she planted some seedlings, just as Doris had taught her.

Sophie had realized long ago that her daughters were still learning that ridiculous magic from Doris. She had burned several magic books, ripped up the girls' seedlings from the garden. Even then, though, her daughters refused to give up. Eventually, Sophie gave up herself. Somewhere along the line, the girls' mother, father, and stepfather all began acting as if they didn't exist. That was fine with them. They wanted new knowledge more than anything and to hone their skills.

Yet the decades had done nothing to cure Doris' self-centered streak. When Alex was ten and Ashley nine, her visits suddenly stopped. Until then, she'd shown up at least twice a year, more often once a month. But two years passed without any sign of Doris.

Alex and Ashley tore through every manual they owned until the spines split and kept tending their herbs. Doris still did not come, and they hungered for more.

Three years after Doris had stopped coming, on a late autumn afternoon, the sisters were tending to their herbs when they sensed a visitor outside the garden. They looked up, expectantly. But instead of Doris they found a woman in black, one who could not have been less like their grandmother.

She was dressed like widows of yesteryear, in clothes of mourning. Where Doris was a woman of many expressions, this woman stared down at the girls frostily. Not even her eyebrow twitched.

"Doris never could finish anything," she muttered angrily.

They knew this mourning widow was another mage. But her cold, chilly

manners, so unlike Doris's, scared them. The sisters drew close, protecting each other.

"A-are you Doris' friend?" Alex asked, timidly.

The widow scowled. "Hardly a 'friend.' We shared a master. Doris was a thorn in my side even then."

She fumed silently for a minute.

"That said, your talent appears to be real. If you want, I'll make you my students. But if I do, you can never return to your families or to ordinary human lives."

This threat had no effect on the sisters. The promise of gaining new knowledge was all it took to get them on board. Their eagerness earned them a frown, the first shift in the widow's expression.

"No. Two is a pain. Just one."

She eyed the sisters, evaluating them. At last she reached out a long, bony finger.

"I'll take you. If you desire it, come with me."

As if beckoned by the voice, Ashley stepped forward. Without ever glancing behind her, she walked to the widow's side.

When she saw this, Alex tried to speak, tried to stop her sister. But it was as if she were bound to the spot. She couldn't move, couldn't make a sound.

"If you raise a fuss, your mother will notice. Can't have that. You stay still till we're gone."

Alex stood rooted to the ground as her best friend, her partner, her only companion, her little sister was taken away. She could only watch through her tears.

Some time after they left, Alex informed her mother that her sister was gone. Her mother just nodded, as if it didn't matter. "Why didn't you go, too?" she said.

Alex would have gone if she could have. She wanted to learn. But Alex hadn't

been chosen.

Shame and self-pity, anger at her sister for leaving her behind, envy, hatred... the emotions inside her exploded. She tore up their little herb garden from the roots, stomped on the plants, destroyed everything.

Why had Ashley been chosen? Why not Alex? Was it because her sister had beautiful red hair? Because she was cuter? Because she was smarter? Because she was better at tending the herbs?

Her sister had been nicer than anyone. How could she have just abandoned Alex without even a backward glance? Had Alex never been anything but a burden to her?

With Ashley gone, Alex was completely alone. Her family continued to act as if she wasn't there. It was the same at school. Alex knew nothing about what other girls liked.

She endured a winter without Ashley. When the bluebells began to bloom, Alex left the house armed only with a tattered textbook and the few remaining herb seeds. She began a journey that lacked destination or purpose.

When Alex woke, she found something soft resting on her. Overhead she saw the same gloomy trees. She could hear a fire burning nearby.

"You're awake?"

She recognized the voice. She tried to sit up, but a sharp pain ran across her belly. Right. She remembered being attacked by an unknown man.

"Don't try and move. You've lost a lot of blood," the voice said.

A face leaned over her, one that surprised her.

"Gancanagh? You saved me?" Alex murmured.

"By pure coincidence. I just happened to be passing by, and found you covered in blood on the ground."

For some reason, the gancanagh appeared to be sulking.

Why would anyone just be "passing by" where she was? Well, he *was* a faerie. Perhaps he had reasons beyond human understanding.

“I found your bag and stopped the bleeding as best I could,” he said.

Carefully, she looked down. Her wound had been bound with some of her few spare clothes. Now she had one less outfit to wear but...well, she probably wouldn't need it. Not anymore.

“Any other human would have died.”

“Haven't you heard? Mages don't die, even if you kill them,” she said.

Grinning, she remembered she had some medicinal herbs in her rucksack. She looked around for it and saw her sack sitting some distance away.

“Can you get something from that for me? A fist-sized bag with a red ribbon.”

The gancanagh started to get up, then frowned.

“I'm not your familiar. Why should I do what you say?”

Fair enough. For some reason, she'd felt it was only natural to ask him.

She apologized and scooted over to the bag, careful not to reopen her wound. Alex found the herbs she needed. The gancanagh watched her restlessly, like he was guarding her.

What a strange faerie. Why had he bothered saving a mage like her?

“Your body's a real mess, you know that?” he said, angrily.

So he'd seen her body when he was treating the wound. She didn't feel embarrassed. It was hardly a pleasant sight, so she felt a little sorry for him.

“Never had a master. Learned to control my magic through trial and error. Mostly the latter.”

The burn on her face, the hair that had lost color, the crystalized parts of her skin...all past failures. She could hide the changes on her arms and body beneath clothes, but there was nothing she could do about her face and hair. Humans who saw Alex reacted one of two ways. They either hurriedly averted their eyes, like they'd seen something disgusting, or gave her looks with “poor girl” written all over them. She hated both expressions and avoided contact with people where she could.

“With skills like that, I can't believe you thought you could take on this

marsh,” the gancanagh said.

Alex shrugged. She didn’t disagree.

“And you’re already badly hurt. You can guess how the rest’ll go.”

“Well, these injuries have nothing to do with the marsh. Some weird man came at me with a knife,” she replied.

Then again, why had that man been there? Humans weren’t supposed to go anywhere near the place. He’d looked like he’d been living in these woods a while.

Surprisingly, the gancanagh had an explanation for this. “A knife-wielding man’s been going after human women around here for a while now. Sounds like he’s been living in this forest. You had the misfortune to run into him.”

Alex remembered hearing people talk about it in a nearby village. This man had claimed several victims, but the police had no idea where the killer lived. If the killer was hiding out in this forest, that explained why. But it didn’t explain why the man would be crazy enough to hide out in a place like this.

How could he survive in here, with this stifling, oppressive air swirling all around? Or was he another one “drawn to death?” Drawn by the marsh’s magic, perhaps driven mad by it? When he’d attacked Alex, his screams hadn’t sounded human.

“If you’re headed back to town, I can take you most of the way,” the gancanagh said.

Alex blinked at this unexpected offer. She found herself staring into his eyes, which gleamed with a strange light, like wet obsidian. She was loath to tear herself away from those eyes.

“Is this one of your seduction techniques?” she asked.

“No. Yesterday was a mistake. I’m not dumb enough to target a mage. You won’t be fooled by me, anyway.”

Then why had he saved her?

“I heard gancanagh were lazy. Didn’t think you’d be this attentive.”

“Gimme a break!” he said.

“Either way, I don’t need to go back to town. But thanks for the offer. I appreciate it.”

The gancanagh stared back at her, surprised.

“You aren’t... Then you’re still going into that marsh?”

“Yeah.”

“You fool! Going there means death at the best of times! In your state, you’ll never make it!”

“Maybe not. But if my life is enough to save a single soul, I’m gonna try. What time is it?”

Her *life*? Had she always planned to die here? Hearing this made the gancanagh furious. After all the trouble he’d gone through to save her!

“How would I know?” he shouted, the anger surprising even him.

The mage nodded and pulled a pocket watch from her tattered cloak. She popped the lid open. “What? It’s already morning?” she said, surprised. “I’m going to sleep a while. If I rest, my body should recover somewhat.”

A few minutes later, her deep breathing made it clear she was asleep. Mages might be made of stronger stuff than your average human, but she wouldn’t recover from that injury with only a few hours rest. Still, it sounded like she was going to head straight for the marsh as soon as she woke. Never to return.

That wasn’t any of the gancanagh’s business. Far from it. He was a faerie that lured human women to their deaths. What did he care about some mage he couldn’t target? He should just leave her in this nauseating forest.

That’s what he told himself, but as he watched the fragile girl asleep in these dark woods, he found he couldn’t move. In the end, he remained staring into the fire.

When Alex woke again, she was surprised to find the faerie still sitting nearby. She’d felt certain he’d have gone back to where he belonged by now. Hesitantly, she spoke to him.

“You feeling better?” he said, grumpily.

“Much.”

Was he genuinely worried about her, or was he up to something? After all, it was his nature to lure human women to their deaths. Alex didn't understand other humans well, much less faeries, so she had no idea how to read his true intentions.

The wound on her belly had closed while she slept...well, not really. Some mages had healing gifts, but they were rare. Alex had no such power, and she had never wanted it more. But at least her wound wasn't bleeding now, and if she bound it tight she should be able to move. Getting plenty of sleep had restored her energy.

She made a simple soup from her remaining canned food. Hunger satiated, she checked her belongings. She looked for her wand first, until she remembered it had shattered. She was immediately dejected. To a mage, a wand was like a key. Losing it was beyond unlucky.

She had never imagined it would shatter like that. Had it been poorly made? Had she misused it? She knew mages crafted their own wands, but usually one's master or some other leader would finish it for you. Since Alex had access to neither, she had made her own, finished it herself, and used it ever since. She'd had no idea if she was using it properly or not.

She sighed and checked the rest of her things. Everything in the gunny bag was intact. The herbs that warded off evil and the magical gems were all there, but the loss of that silver knife hurt. Crystal and lapis lazuli lay embedded in its hilt, and the blade had been forged in moonlight with melted snow. She'd hired a magus craft artificer to make it for quite a lot of money. She'd intended to use it to achieve her goal here. Losing it was nearly as disastrous as losing the wand, but she had no time to lament. She just had to do what she could.

After one last check, she closed the bag again. She glanced at her pocket watch and saw it was just past 5 PM. If she left now, she'd reach the marsh by the time the moon rose. Alex put out the fire and stood. She turned to leave and then wondered if she should thank the gancanagh. She had few things that a faerie would like, but... She turned back towards him and was surprised to

find the gancanagh standing behind her as if ready to follow.

“I’m heading out,” she said.

“Hmph,” he said, grumpily. Nothing more.

But when Alex started walking, he came along.

Babying her wound, she took it one step at a time. Every step squelched in the wet ground. She couldn’t hear anything behind her, but whenever she turned to look, the gancanagh was there.

As the sun set, the darkness deepened. Sensing the unpleasant air congealing, Alex shuddered. She lit her incense lamp. The faint light guided her way between the dark trees; the air filled with the scent of herbs. She felt a little better.

“Whose soul are you trying to save in exchange for your own life?”

After all this time in silence, the gancanagh’s voice surprised Alex. She swung to face him. He was shrouded in darkness but stepped into the light as if drawn to it.

She didn’t think she’d told him she was trying to save someone’s soul. But then again, nobody risked their own life to save the soul of a complete stranger. Even the gancanagh could guess that much.

Alex hesitated but gave a rueful smile and hung her head. The light from the lamp wavered.

“My sister. I killed her,” she said.

He frowned. It didn’t seem like he took her at her word, but he didn’t disbelieve her, either. He seemed to be searching for the hidden truth.

“It’s a stupid story,” Alex said, turning the light to her path. She started to walk again. The unpleasant atmosphere and fear were no different than the day before, but for some reason, she felt calmer right now. Did having someone else here provide that much comfort?

“My sister had all the magical talent and a proper teacher.”

After leaving home, Alex had drifted from place to place, never staying

anywhere long. She had no real goals and lacked the courage to ask the mages she met to take her as a student. She just kept repeating the things Doris had taught her and learned more things on her own as she traveled. Along the way, she discovered where her sister lived. The mage who had taken Ashley was called The Black Widow—her title reinforcing Alex’s impression of her. She was a fairly well-known mage.

But Alex never once went to see Ashley. She had no idea how to face her sister again. Perhaps Ashley had long since forgotten she even *had* a sister. Alex had not been chosen, and if she just showed up out of the blue, she would likely not be welcomed. From time to time, she’d stare at the house’s lights from a distance, never catching a glimpse of her sister. But she never worked up the courage to truly walk away. Her travels were always stationed within a certain distance of her sister.

During this time, Alex heard stories about an ancient forest with a cursed marsh inside and was foolish enough to head in, hoping to test her mettle.

The result had been disastrous.

She’d been frustrated, ashamed that she’d overestimated her own strength, curious if the result would have been different with a proper teacher.

She’d abandoned the stupid idea of conquering the swamp herself, but another idiotic notion had possessed her.

She had not been able to handle it...but what about Ashley? Her training might be going well, but perhaps Ashley couldn’t handle it, either.

Ashley would feel powerless, too. She would learn that even the chosen one could not win every battle.

This dark impulse ballooned up within her until Alex sent her sister a letter. Pretending to be the younger sister of a woman who’d thrown herself into the marsh and died, she begged Ashley to save her sister’s soul from the marsh’s prison.

At the time, she hadn’t known what the letter would prompt Ashley to do. Maybe she would just ignore it. If the mage teaching her found out about the letter, she’d know it was a lie immediately. But Alex just sent the fake letter and

then ran away, heedless of the consequences.

But Alex was wrong. Her sister had believed the letter to be true, had gone to the marsh...and had never returned.

Finished with her story, Alex peered into the darkness beyond her lamp's reach.

"My sister's teacher wrote to me of Ashley's death. She sent a bird to me on my travels to tell me that my sister had died."

Ashley is dead. Her blood is on your hands.

The message had hit her hard. She had felt the cold fury radiating off the page.

The widow-like mage knew exactly what had happened. She knew Alex had sent a fake letter out of spite, and this had led to Ashley's death. The widow blamed Alex for this. Ever since, once a year, as the date of Ashley's death drew nearer, the mage would send her another note with the same message: *How long are you going to leave your sister's soul trapped there?*

"I regret ever doing something so stupid and horrifying. But..." When she received the letter, Alex had cried her eyes out. She'd screamed aloud that she never meant for Ashley to die, as if making excuses to anyone who would listen. But that had been a lie. "When I learned my sister was dead, I was both sad and relieved. Relieved, because *she* hadn't been able to pull it off, either. Awful, right?"

Deep down, part of Alex had hoped her sister would fail and die. She hoped it was a very small part of her that could wish for something so cruel. The realization that she could feel such a thing had hit her harder than anything else.

"It's your fault she died, so you'll trade your life for her soul? Man, you humans sure do the strangest things," the gancanagh said, shaking his head. "Is this that retribution thing I've heard about? Makes no sense to me."

"Your kind lure human women to their deaths. You think nothing of that, then?"

The gancanagh looked puzzled, as if he had no idea what she was talking about. The mage glanced back at him, annoyed.

“No guilt at all? Even though innocent blood is on your hands,” she said.

At last he understood what she was asking, but he just looked even more confused.

“When humans grow hungry, do they refrain from eating even when food’s right in front of them? Are meat and vegetables innocent? If breathing was a sin, would you stop?” he asked.

Young girls brimming with life, hope, and youth proved irresistible to his kind. Honeyed words, beautiful smiles—these traits were all designed to attract girls, to imprison them. That’s what gancanagh were. Soon the girls would fall in love, destroy themselves chasing what could never be, and then their lights would go out. That was a gancanagh’s role.

“That’s what we are. That is our nature,” he said.

The mage frowned for a moment but soon shook her head and faced forwards once more.

“Your nature? Well, it’s human nature to regret and try to make amends.”

She spoke as if she wasn’t concerned. The gancanagh suppressed an exasperated sigh.

“If you don’t have the power, at least bring a familiar,” he said.

Even someone of her dubious skill should be able to get one. For a moment, the mage stopped in her tracks and glanced back at him. He thought he saw her smile.

“Well, I’m not that good a mage. Nothing could survive being with me long. I killed my own sister over stupid jealousy. I have no right to ask anyone to die with me.”

A shock ran through the gancanagh, as if he’d been struck by lightning.

She passed judgment on herself. Just like when they’d first met, her tone reminded him of the winter winds. Lonely, sad, and hollow.

This girl suffered in isolation. She craved the warmth of others yet punished herself for her sister's death. Terrified to die alone, she still saw death as the punishment she deserved even as she longed for someone to share her fate.

Humans were fools to punish themselves. He could not understand it. But the gancanagh could not find the words to argue. He felt like nothing would reach this girl.

Neither spoke. They continued through the forest, swallowed by darkness, until they reached the edge of the marsh. Thin clouds covered the sky, and they could just make out the light of the moon.

There was no wind, but the water's surface gently rippled. The feeble light of the ancient incense lamp lit the area. The smell of rot assaulted their nostrils. The unpleasantness that had followed them through the forest grew much worse here. It felt like someone was pounding iron stakes into the ground at his feet. The gancanagh longed to turn and run but knew he couldn't do that. Just as this marsh bound the souls of the dead, so did the gancanagh feel bound to this mage.

Foolish. I'm not her familiar!

He should run. If things got dangerous, he could always leave her here. He shook his head, trying to convince himself of that. But then there was a pop as a bubble surfaced on the marsh.

"Mage!"

Alex had approached the water's edge. By the time the gancanagh called out, it was already too late. Two arms reached out of the water, grabbed her ankles, and dragged her beneath the surface with a loud splash. The gancanagh tried to snatch her but came up empty.

Before him, the marsh's surface went still, as if nothing had ever happened.

The force dragging her was far stronger than she'd ever expected. Alex sank, helpless to fight against this thing. Through the murky water, she could not see her assailant's face. But she *could* see a knife sticking out of him. She knew it was that man again and was astonished he could attack her like this with his injuries.

The man pulled Alex with raw strength. It was like he'd set roots down at the bottom of the water. Struggling for air, she swallowed a sickening amount of water. Her consciousness began to fade.

"If you won't love me, then we must die together."

As she retched, desperate for air, a man's voice came to her.

"I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die!"

"Somebody, help me!"

This time she heard echoing women's screams.

Oh, Alex realized. This was the voice of the man attacking her, and the screams of the souls of the women he'd murdered. Their fear of death, their anger at the one killing them, all of these emotions festered in the marsh's depths.

Image after image floated into Alex's mind, then vanished. A distressed woman shaking her head—the man, his love rejected, his dejection fading to rage. A woman's face in the darkness, twisted with fear, her mouth open wide—the man's knife stabbing into her, over and over. A woman who lay in a puddle of blood—the man, sobbing fearfully at his own actions before screaming and running away.

He reached the marsh that the locals dared not enter. Memories from that point on were hazy, scattered.

Memories...this man's memories? I thought I didn't have a knack for the sight.

As Alex wondered, a high-pitched girl's voice sounded in her ear.

"Hey! Let's go back!"

Suddenly, Alex found herself standing in the forest. Trees surrounded her. She was not yet at the marsh.

"This is impossible, Ashley," a girl's voice said.

Alex jumped at the familiar name and looked around. Nearby, a light swayed feebly. Alex walked towards the light, as if drawn to it. The voices grew louder and more distinct with every step she took. She recognized one of those voices.

"I know. This marsh is too much for me."

"Then—"

"But I think I can save a single soul. It might be dangerous, but—"

"Why do this? You don't know the person who wrote that letter!"

A tiny little girl, barely tall enough to reach Ashley's waist, tried to stop her. She must have been Ashley's familiar. She was trying to block her master's path, but there was a glint in Ashley's eye. She looked only forward.

"True, I don't know her, but I understand her pain. She couldn't save her sister. She couldn't do anything. I know how much that hurts, because I abandoned my own sister," Ashley said.

"You didn't! You just happened to be the one chosen as a student!"

"No. I could have stayed behind with Alex, and I chose not to do that. Do you know why? Because I was hungry for knowledge. I wanted to know more, to know all kinds of things. The moment I saw a path forward, I forgot all about my sister. Can you believe it? Alex always protected me. She'd always stand in the line of fire when the bullies came after me. When we tried a dangerous experiment, she'd always take the first attempt. But when faced with the one thing we both wanted, I left her behind."

Ashley's voice shook. She sounded angry at herself, helpless to change things.

"But even if you save the soul of the woman's sister, that won't help *your* sister," the little girl said.

"True. I'm just being selfish. But until I see Alex again, I at least want to do something. If I don't do this, I don't know that I'll ever find the courage to see her. Because I know how the person who sent that letter feels, I can't ignore it."

"Then at least talk to your master. You left without even telling her!"

Ashley shook her head.

"No. She said she was no good at purifications, and she'd just tell me not to do anything. You know she always says mages should never get involved unless they have no choice. She might have even locked me away so I couldn't come here. I had to go without her knowing."

The familiar looked ready to burst into tears.

Ashley gave a faint smile. “Don’t worry. Even if something happens to me, I’ve arranged it so she’ll know.”

The familiar appeared to understand that Ashley wouldn’t change her mind. She gave up and followed in sullen silence.

When Alex had sent the fake letter, she’d hoped her sister would fail and feel powerless. But one other thought had crossed her mind.

She’d always known Ashley was too nice, so nice she even worried about her own bullies’ injuries. She could never have ignored a request from someone who’d lost their older sister. Alex had known this was true, but she’d wanted to be certain. She’d wanted to know for sure that her sister hadn’t changed, that she still cared about Alex. She’d sent that stupid letter to test Ashley’s feelings for her. And the result...

“Ashley!” Alex found herself running after them. “Don’t go!”

Part of her still knew this was just a memory and that she could not stop her sister. But she couldn’t just stand and watch it happen.

“Please, stop!”

Alex grabbed her sister’s arm. For a second, she touched Ashley. But in that same instant, the forest around them vanished, leaving only ice-cold water and the burning need to breathe. Just before she passed out completely, something grabbed Alex and yanked her up to the surface.

The gancanagh saw something float to the marsh’s surface and ran over. His hopes were dashed. The floater was a strange man with a silver knife buried deep in his chest. He was a dead, unmoving weight, his life already ended.

This man had attacked the mage, pulled her under the water. But even though her assailant was dead, the girl herself did not surface.

Can’t she swim? Or is something else going on?

The marsh water was so murky he couldn’t see a thing. The sinister aura that emanated from the water was even worse than the one around the marsh.

Normally, he would never ever consider coming this close, but now the

gancanagh stuck his arm in the water. He tried to make something out, anything. As he did, he grew angry.

Why should I have to feel like this?

Why did he suffocate as he wondered if she was alive? He couldn't bear the thought that she might already be dead.

He remembered all the girls he'd lured to their deaths. How they'd suffered. How his magic had made them love him, how he didn't return their love. How it tore them apart, how it took their lives. For the first time, he understood how they felt.

"Th-this is absurd!"

This couldn't be happening to him. Nothing this ludicrous could be real. A faerie could never hope to understand these emotions.

But the most ridiculous part of all was the way he couldn't bring himself to run away, the way he shuffled around the edge of the marsh.

This realization of what he felt decided him. Without another thought, he plunged into the dark, murky water.

"Hey, are you okay?" the gancanagh shouted.

Alex coughed up water, her lungs burning for air. The gancanagh held her arm.

Her breathing had recovered enough to allow her to look at him. They were both soaking wet. He must have jumped into the marsh to pull her out. Alex was about to answer him when she realized she had something in her hand, held tight to her chest.

An ash wand.

The finish was white. There was a beautiful red stone at the tip, the same color as the owner's hair.

It was Ashley's wand, one that used wood from the tree after which she was named. The same wand Alex had seen her carrying in those memories. Even in this darkness, the white of the wand seemed to gleam.

Alex let out a voiceless scream and hugged the wand tight to her chest.

Why had she seen those memories so vividly, despite her weak sight? She was sure it was because this wand—Ashley's soul—had shown them to her.

Ashley had regretted things, too, regretted abandoning her sister. She'd longed for a way to set things right.

As Alex sobbed, the gancanagh shook her shoulder.

"Hey! This is bad!" he said.

She looked up, only now noticing the sinister aura. The ghastly marsh air surrounded them. Voices echoed, shaking the ground. They were the voices of the women she'd heard in the marsh, the ones that man had killed...and there was also the scrabbling sound of some unknown thing.

"We gotta run!"

The gancanagh grabbed Alex's arm and dragged her to her feet, but Alex hugged the wand again. Ashley had given her this wand, as if begging her to save these poor women. The women she had been unable to save herself.

At the edge of Alex's vision, she saw the man's fallen corpse. The knife protruded from his chest.

"I can't run," she said.

"Huh?"

"I have to save them."

She ran towards the man's body, suddenly conscious of the horrible pain in her belly. The wound had opened in the filthy water, but she didn't have time for this now. She ignored it as she reached the man and pulled the knife from him. This was easier said than done, but, panting hard, she managed it.

She turned back to the marsh's edge, wiping the blood off the knife before stabbing it into the ground. In that instant, the haze covering the swamp lifted a little. A beam of moonlight found the crystal and lapis lazuli embedded in the knife's handle, like it was guiding her way.

Alex took a firm grip on the ash wand, and held it out before her.

“Silver, cast off thy yoke,” she said.

Magic energy coursed through her body. When it touched her wound, the pain hit her like a blow. Her body swayed, and the sinister aura welled up around her. She gritted her teeth and stood her ground. Someone beside her grabbed her wand hand in support. The pain ebbed away.

Alex glanced sideways, surprised. The gancanagh looked back wordlessly, as if granting her courage. She wasn’t sure why, but it seemed he intended to lend her his power. With this newfound strength, Alex tightened her grip on the wand once more.

“Show the path to disperse this evil,” she said.

The stones in the knife’s handle gleamed, and the foul aura around them drew back.

“Lead it where it belongs, oh silver light!”

With a shout, she released the magic. The moonlight pierced the haze and gleamed upon the knife. A burst of light enveloped them. Alex closed her eyes, but the light shone only for a moment. Soon the darkness and gloom returned to the marsh.

Alex slowly opened her eyes again. The haze covered the sky once more, and the moon’s outline was only faintly visible. She looked down at the marsh’s edge. The knife jammed in the ground appeared blackened, like it had been left there for years. The blade was falling apart. Only the crystals and lapis lazuli still glittered in the darkness.

The air around them felt a little bit cleaner than before. If she listened closely, Alex could still hear that unearthly scrabbling at the back of the marsh, but the women’s suffering voices were gone.

Had it really worked? Alex stared quietly down at the water, hardly believing it. She’d never imagined she would pull this off without dying.

Her eyes focused on the white ash wand in her hands. She realized that she had not accomplished this alone.

Ashley saved me.

Alex knew her sister's soul was still bound to this dark, foul swamp. She had chosen to save the women who had died here instead of herself.

I don't have enough power.

Alex felt that bitterly. She didn't have the power or the resolve.

She'd thought she would be free from suffering if she could trade her life to save her sister. She'd be free from the accusatory letters her sister's master had sent over the years, free from her own guilt.

I was just being selfish. Just being a coward.

"Let's go," the gancanagh said.

Self-hatred froze Alex. As the gancanagh spoke, he took her in his arms.

"Wh-what?!" she yelped.

The gancanagh looked grim as he pulled her away from the marsh. "I don't want to spend another second in a place like this. I don't care what you say. You can't walk on your own, can you?"

True. She was utterly drained. Her shaking hands hung limp. Choosing to accept his generosity, Alex did not argue.

Still, how strange. Why would this faerie choose to save a selfish, amateur mage like her? Not just save her when she lay wounded, but follow her to the marsh, pull her out of the water, and help her to rescue these lost souls. She had done nothing to deserve his help.

Alex had never had a familiar, but she wondered if this was what having one was like. Someone to save you when you were in trouble, to support you when you struggled—someone to soothe the turbulent heart. That was much more than Alex deserved.

The sound of footsteps on damp ground sounded through the night. The gancanagh headed straight for the edge of the forest. Meanwhile, that suffocating, stifling air began to fade. The haze grew thinner. Alex heard insects again, and then she and the gancanagh were out of the trees. The full moon shone in the night sky. Its light had been so feeble behind the clouds that its sheer brightness astonished her.

“Gancanagh, that’s enough. Thank you,” she said.

Whether from rest or because they had left the forest, Alex felt her strength return. She bid the gancanagh put her down and savored the feel of the dry earth beneath her feet. Her belly still hurt, but if she gritted her teeth and supported herself with the white wand, she could bear it.

The gancanagh stared down at her. Alex wondered if she had any way to repay him. She’d lost her herbs to the marsh waters, so all she had were a few coins in her pockets. She was nearly penniless. After all, she’d never expected to live.

“Your sister’s soul is still trapped in there?” he asked.

“Yes. You were right. I couldn’t save her.”

“Then you aren’t finished yet. You’re going back, aren’t you?”

She had considered it.

“Yes, but not right now. I’m not strong enough yet. I doubt a little studying here and there will be enough. But maybe in a few years, or decades...maybe then I’ll be able to save her soul.”

She would work until she succeeded or died. This was her life’s purpose now.

The gancanagh nodded. His obsidian gaze pierced Alex.

“Take me with you.”

“What?”

Alex had no idea what he was saying. The gancanagh felt a kind of relief, as if he’d relinquished something. He’d found the only words with which he could reach her.

“I’ll die with you. So take me along,” he said.

“I have no right to ask anyone to die with me.”

Being alone was the punishment she’d inflicted on herself.

No matter how hard it was, or how lonely she got, no matter how scared she was of dying alone, Alex had sent her sister to die for a selfish purpose. She believed she did not deserve the comfort of companionship, the right to desire

the warmth of another by her side. Not after sending her sister to the bottom of a cold swamp.

It wasn't that she didn't long for that warmth. It wasn't that she didn't want a companion.

But I don't deserve that.

His companionship had provided great comfort when she'd been injured. When the fear and tension nearly overwhelmed her, his presence had been a huge support. The events of tonight had lessened the emptiness inside of her, but such relief could only be temporary.

"See?"

The gancanagh reached out. Her hand tightened on the wand, ready to reject him, but he ignored it.

"Let me tell you, once my kind make up their minds, no mere human can turn us away. No matter how much you may not want it, I'm coming with you. Got it?"

Destiny united us. We were meant to be together. These were empty phrases of seduction that meant nothing to the gancanagh, paper-thin promises he tore right through. He'd never dreamed a day would come when he would mean the words he said.

But now that he'd met her, his path was set. The hollow in those eyes, the palpable loneliness like the winter wind...he wanted to heal both.

Yet he expressed this with grumpy threats, and Alex couldn't help but smile back. It was as if their roles had been reversed.

Ashley, I promise I'll come back to save you. I'll work for it until I've used my last drop of strength.

Alex took her right hand off the wand.

So...is it all right if I accept this offer?

For a moment, the wand against her chest caught the moonlight. Its white finish gleamed like a reply. It felt like her sister had granted her permission, but was that just wishful thinking?

Alex took his hand, and her quiet voice echoed in the moonlight.

“Let the cord once severed be bound

As the crescent moon grows full, as the empty cup is filled

Fir, let branch be bound to branch, a circle that shall never be broken

As long as the sap in the great tree does not dry”

Something inside her grew whole. Something she had previously lacked felt tangible. Alex closed her eyes, savoring the sensation.

“By the way,” he said, after a while. “As your familiar, I’ll receive a new name. But I warn you, if it’s dumb, I’ll reject it.”

The gancanagh was adamant about this point. Alex hesitated, unsure. She’d never been good at names. She thought for a long while, staring at the wand in her hand.

Then she made up her mind.

“Alex,” she said.

The gancanagh rolled the name around on his tongue.

“‘Defender?’ Not bad.”

She should have protected her sister, yet she’d sent her to die. She did not have the right to call herself a defender. She did not deserve that name. That name belonged to him, to the one who’d risked his own life and changed his nature to save a mage he’d just met.

“Well, first we need to get to town. Treat those wounds of yours, buy some new clothes. Can’t have a girl like you dressed in those rags,” he said.

Barely a familiar and already he grumbled at his master. He reached out to pick her up again, mindful of her injuries.

“Oh, right. You never told me your name,” he said.

She felt like they’d been together a long time, even though it had been only a few days. Yet she had not given her name. Surprising. The young mage made up her mind and told him her name.

“Ashley.”

How many times had she come to this marsh now?

Watching the newly freed souls return, she realized she no longer remembered the answer. New souls had become trapped here each time she came. Like brushing dust away, it was all she could manage to free the new souls. Her sister's soul remained trapped. No signs indicated that the curse on this place had waned, but this marsh had always been that way. Its evil was not so easily dealt with.

Still, she had to keep trying. This was her punishment and her duty.

No matter what happened, for as long as she lived she would return to this place and face her sin. Since the day she had sworn that oath, she'd received no letters from her sister's master. She didn't know why the widow had sent her those letters in the first place. Perhaps she'd simply wanted someone to save her student in her stead. As her nickname implied, her sister's master was not the purification type; she was more an expert on death.

Perhaps the widow had blamed herself for her student's death. Perhaps she'd regretted not being able to save the girl. Perhaps that's why she'd sent those letters to her student's sister, demanding that she save her. But that was all a guess. There was no way of being sure. The widow had sold her home and vanished.

“Right, well, that's this one done! Let's go home.”

Her familiar still hated this place and never let her dally. As they walked, he quietly put an arm around her shoulders. She must have seemed unsteady on her feet.

“When we get back, you're treating yourself well, okay? You really are an awful miser! Saving and saving, never spending a penny that isn't related to your magic. Caring about good food and nice clothes doesn't make you weaker, you know!”

This lecture again. Ashley laughed out loud. Her faerie companion never changed. He was always by her side, and always the same, if a bit of a nag.

“Thanks, Alex.”

He made a face. “Are you even listening?”

His scowl just struck her as funny. Her laughter drowned out his scolding.

“I mean it, Ashley!” Angrily, her familiar called her by *that* name.

Every time someone called her Ashley, every time she introduced herself, her guilt welled up again. Carved into her soul, it would never leave. But at the same time, no one could take that guilt from her. Her sister was still here with her, and would always be.

The name was proof of her sin, both her burden...and a blessing.

The End



The Man Who Hungered for Trees

Jun'ichi Fujisaku

“No. I’m cultivating them. Cultivating...the trees...”

Paul Anderson had vanished.

In other words, this was a missing persons case.

Paul Anderson. Forty-nine. Male. Occupation: game programmer.

A bit of a genius.

The company I worked for had sent me to his flat to see if he’d left anything behind.

Me?

Sorry, forgot to introduce myself.

I’m Alan. Alan Hiiragi. I’m half-Japanese, half a mix of different European nations. My parents and grandmother never

really looked into our genealogy. If I tried tracing the family tree, I’d probably be able to figure out where the mixed bits of me came from. Oh well.

I was an assistant director at the company that employed Paul.

I documented plans dreamed up by my boss, Jock. I helped record the motion capture, made sure we ironed out the bugs, and managed the overall workload for the designers and programmers. I wasn’t much good at any of these gigs. As a result, I spent a lot of time with exasperated people. That’s how I ended up being Jock’s errand boy, the one who took care of weird jobs like this one.

Recently, my odd jobs had included looking after Paul Anderson, who’d managed to make himself vital to the company.

Paul’s programming was unique, even for our team.

While the other programmers were all using high-level languages like C#, he alone refused to write in anything but assembly language. This meant they

charged him with writing any program engines that placed a heavy load directly on the hardware.

Without the engines Paul made for us, the other programmers' gorgeous character actions and flashy effects would never bloom. You could say he laid down the data-retrieval roots needed to cultivate those flowers.

It was dull work and always under the radar. Not only was it boring, but Paul also had to deal with impossible requests from upstairs. He had to feel his way forward through trial and error, with no end in sight. Even if he managed to finish the engine, the platform specs would change without warning and render all his work useless. But Paul never complained about any of it. He took it all on with glee.

He never set foot outside. He just holed up in his flat, hunched over a monitor. He'd stare fixedly at the screen for long hours, the silence punctuated by sporadic, furious bursts of typing like he'd just remembered he had a keyboard.

He seemed to take no interest in anything but work.

Nobody understood Paul.

Paul's personality was not the only incomprehensible thing; nobody understood his code, either.

Most programmers would leave comments in the code, but Paul never commented once. To decipher his work, you had to track each individual command and do a full structural analysis of these massive files, files which may not even work at all.

Yet when Paul said one of these incomprehensible programs was done, it ran efficiently, its results better than what we'd anticipated.

Everyone called it magic.

But our mage was gone, leaving behind an old flat in Edinburgh.

After all I'd done for him, he'd just disappeared with no warning.

Edinburgh is part of the United Kingdom but not part of England.

It's the capital city of Scotland. Edinburgh Castle stands atop Castle Rock,

surveying the surrounding countryside. The wild hills of Holyrood Park lie in the center of those ancient streets.

Paul lived in an old flat with a grand view of those hills. His flat was in an ancient, four-story building. All the surrounding buildings had similar exteriors.

The company had offered him a nice flat near our office, but he liked Edinburgh. He refused to leave the place he'd lived for years.

There was an old creek out back and a small shared backyard. Even the shed in that yard looked like it was doing its part to sell the old Edinburgh feel. I'd often seen a stray cat from God knows where napping on the shed roof. It was a nice, fat cat, which meant the residents must have been feeding it. It dragged one foot behind it when it walked, so perhaps it had broken that leg at some point. I hadn't seen the cat lately. Maybe its owner had found it. Or perhaps the city pound had taken it.

I'd often seen Paul stop his work and gaze out this window.

You wouldn't call the flat large, so the view was the only thing really worth looking at.

The flat had a bedroom, a shower, and his office—which also functioned as the living room, dining room, and kitchen. All the furniture had been pushed together, converted to a section that housed his rack of computers and dev kits. You could just barely get past this to access the kitchen.

The fridge was a repository for the frozen dinners I bought. The kitchen existed solely to heat those dinners up in the microwave.

Given the sheer number of computers in use, Paul had laid down an array of extension cords designed to pull power from different circuits around the flat. His electric bills were always pretty nuts, but work took care of them.

He was that important to us. Unlike me. I could be easily replaced.

As if reading my mind, the smartphone in my pocket vibrated.

"Hello?" I said.

"Alan, you recover anything?"

"Jock. No, I just got here."

My boss, Jock, was one of the company's high-profile directors. He'd developed a smash hit fantasy RPG in the past. These days, though, he was known for upturning the entire game plan on a whim. Most people detested him.

But Jock had a very high opinion of Paul's skills. When faced with a drastic spec change, few programmers would grin happily and say, "I'll just make it again."

"Paul must have hidden the original program files somewhere. Find them! Don't come back until you do, got it?" he snapped.

"I know."

"You only have this job because of Paul."

"I know that, too." I sighed, hung up, and stared at what had once been Paul's holy domain.

After Paul's disappearance, we'd copied the hard drives of every computer here and taken them to the office. If Paul showed up again and found we'd taken all his systems, he'd be furious. He really hated anyone else touching his machines.

So I'd always been careful not to touch.

Always.

I'd brought him daily necessities, discovering him always hard at work at his desk. I felt like I'd only ever seen his back. Or, occasionally, his profile as he stared out at the yard.

If I spoke to him, he never answered with anything more complicated than yes or no.

My presence mattered no more to him than a single chat line in an instant messenger program. So long as I did not set foot in the holy realm around his desk, he never raised his voice.

But one time...

I'd gone out to the yard to clear my head and had absently put my hand on the shed door.

A booming voice had echoed from his flat.

“Don’t touch the neighbors!”

That was the only time I’d heard him yell.

I’d looked up to find him beet red, a color I had never seen him turn before or since.

I’d left the garden and gone up to his room. There, I’d found him back at work, displaying only his back or his profile once more.

What had he meant by “neighbors?” Did the shed belong to someone in another flat?

“Well. I can’t leave until I get this done.”

I fired up Paul’s work computer with the magic key.

“Ha ha. It’s just the company admin password.”

An individual accessing a PC was just a single user account, tied together under the admin rights. Naturally, Paul had been given the broad rights of an admin and been free to do as he pleased.

But Paul had had no interest in security.

After all, nobody could understand the code he wrote.

Any kind of data is structured like a big tree, with many branches reaching out from one big trunk. Each individual only works on and understands the branch to which they’re assigned. Everyone touches the vital trunk.

Companies are structured the same way.

When you get down to it, society itself is no different.

My job now was to hunt for insects on each individual leaf and every branch. Unfortunately, every leaf looked the same to me.

Most programs were organized in individual files according to their function. Those files got pulled as that function was needed, over and over again.

Main routines called for sub routines. There was a clear command structure and a program that managed those commands.

“And my main routine is Jock,” I said.

All he had to do was tell me what to do, really.

The main program managed the others, and the fastest approach was to track that main one down.

But Paul’s code was unique, lacking the comments anyone else’s would have.

You needed specialist knowledge to decipher it and the ability to figure out what would happen after each jump.

All I could do was grab a notepad and draw a chart of the links between one file and another, sketching lines between the names. I couldn’t understand any of it.

They’d called him a genius programmer, a mage. He’d kept this all in his head.

Just trying to comprehend all this with my thoroughly average mind made me dizzy.

Dizzying workloads always contained traps filled with sleep spells.

I fell straight into one.

“Alan, you have no talent.”

Paul stared coldly at me.

“You should have quit years ago.”

Oh. This was a dream.

I realized it right away.

This conversation had happened last month and was now replaying as one of my memories.

“You have no idea what I’m doing, do you?”

What had I said in return?

I felt like I’d said something, but I doubt I’d argued his point.

“I’m cultivating them. Cultivating the...”

Right.

I'd said we were growing something.

And Paul had looked out at the garden wearing a rare smile.

Rustle...

Something touched my arm, waking me.

The monitor screen was the room's sole light. Darkness shrouded the corners.

It was night outside. Only a distant streetlight's feeble glow seeped in through the window.

I'd fallen asleep, and a touch had woken me.

Something had brushed against me. I remembered how it felt.

It felt like fur.

"A rat?" I muttered.

It was an old flat.

It wouldn't be at all strange for rats or mice to live here. I'd never seen any such creatures skulking around while that cat was in the garden. But now that the cat was gone, the rodents' numbers had increased.

That rat might still be watching me somewhere.

Rats carried disease. They chewed through electric cables. I didn't want any trouble with these machines.

"I'll have to buy some rat poison tomorrow."

I'd fallen asleep working. Clearly my body wanted me to get a good night's rest and start again in daylight.

I was not built for all-nighters.

When I woke the next morning, I went to the local grocery, intending to buy things to handle the rats.

But I'd never bought anything like that before.

Come to think of it, I'd never had a need for that sort of thing before.

The city council might send an exterminator, but Jock would never permit

anyone from outside our company to enter that flat now.

So without knowing what I was doing, I bought some old-fashioned mousetraps and a few cryptically labeled poisons. Struggling with the weight of the bag, I sat on a bench between the grocery and the flat and stared up at the gray skies of Edinburgh.

“I should have bought some ale,” I muttered.

No telling how long this job would take me.

If I didn’t find some way to relax myself, I felt like I’d never get anywhere.

Nutrition was important.

“You’ve been touched!”

A dark voice whispered at my shoulder.

I spun around to find a boy in a black coat standing not two steps away. He had even features but darkness in his eyes. He stared, as if observing my reaction.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“My name...what was it? It doesn’t matter. You should leave that place. They’re a quick study,” he said.

They?

“You know something?”

“You still have time. Consider yourself warned,” he said.

Time? What did that mean?

As I considered this, the boy vanished into thin air.

Had I been seeing things?

I had definitely not slept enough. I’d gone to bed after that weird sensation crept over my arm, but sleep had evaded me.

I knew something else was in that flat.

I’d never touched a rat before. I couldn’t be sure I’d felt a rat’s fur.

It had seemed softer than I'd imagined a rat would be...

I could feel that sensation on my arm again.

"It'll be fine. I bought a lot of traps."

The mousetraps in the bag felt like my own personal knights.

But...

You should leave.

That strange boy's words bothered me.

By "they," did he mean the rats?

But what kind of rat was a quick study? That didn't make any sense.

Back at the flat, I quickly set traps in the places I thought rats would go and under any furniture I thought they might hide. I moved all the food into the fridge. I doubted rats would be able to open the heavy fridge door.

Just in case, I made sure there weren't any large gaps in the windows and doors.

The windows were good.

The gap under the door was only a few millimeters high.

I didn't think a rat could get through that.

With this taken care of, I sat down before Paul's computer.

Once again, I began tediously chasing the jumps to other files.

Perhaps Paul's disappearance was no big mystery.

Maybe he simply hadn't been able to take this crap any longer.

Maybe he'd just bailed.

I sure as hell wanted to run for the hills as I sat in this room with only the screen and the window for company.

Paul was the type of guy who took a break from writing one program by writing a *different* program? It was perfectly reasonable to think he'd had enough.

But how could he program so flawlessly without leaving a single note behind?

Here I was, squinting at files, making checklists, and the files were turning into a veritable spider's web.

The bulk of them were complex programming loops, transferring data from register to register and releasing it.

These points collected to form a line, giving the whole thing shape.

I couldn't see the specific shape, but the information's movement clearly laid the foundation for something.

Each program was a point, and as the links between them formed a line, I began to see the picture those lines formed.

"What did you want to make, Paul?" I said.

I'd never wondered before.

Watching Paul program a game engine that talked directly to the hardware, that thought had never entered my head. I'd taken it for granted that this was what he did, and as his support I'd done only what I was ordered to do.

Trapped in this dull room, faced with this tedious task, for the first time ever I felt I had touched Paul's mindset. Obviously, this work was not the whole of the man. Unless he had some larger goal, though, curiosity about the world outside should have driven him to open his door and leave long ago.

It was easy enough to do.

We hadn't shut him in here.

He controlled the lock on his door.

Perhaps he called himself an escort every now and then without us knowing.

Obviously, this was a remote possibility.

If he'd been up to something like that, I'd have caught a glimpse of her. Maybe I'd have spied some traces she'd left behind.

But Paul had done nothing of the sort.

Had no intention of doing it.

Most of us, even if we liked our jobs, worked for some other reason.

Money.

Family.

Success.

It all ultimately came down to self-satisfaction, but I felt like Paul didn't even have that.

Paul himself seemed to be just part of the program, here to carry out a task.

My notepad's chart grew more and more complicated, turning into some sort of bizarre cypher.

I'd redrawn parts of it. Lines between programs were pointlessly doubled up or crossed out.

If someone besides me looked at it, they'd see meaningless scribbles.

"The opposite of Paul's programs. The only thing the two have in common is that they don't make any sense."

I sighed, turned the page, and tried to clarify the chart.

If I didn't clean this up now, it would only lead to trouble. I'd learned that lesson several times over.

"Jock's yelled at me enough."

I didn't mind cleaning things up.

It was like resolving the sprawling mess in your head into something with clear shape and form.

To clean a chart, you reproduced the work without anything meaningless. You selected what to keep and removed all the clutter, leaving behind a single form.

"Although I'm nowhere close to done," I said.

The new chart was much clearer.

No extra notes, no mistakes...

"Like Paul's programs...hmm."

I revisited Paul's code on the computer screen.

Row after row of focused code.

If he'd deliberately removed all the comments...

Then a source version must exist.

But this computer didn't have that data.

I could only think of two things.

First, he must have saved written notes somewhere.

And second, he must have a fully commented version of the program code saved.

But where?

I knew every inch of this flat.

The only part I hadn't touched was his holy zone, but he couldn't hide an entire computer there.

External memory?

Action was easier than thought.

I started searching the place.

An hour later the room was a lot cleaner, but I hadn't found what I wanted.

The drawers contained no external hard drives, no USB memory, and no hand-scrawled notes.

I'd tried flipping the drawers, peering in the gaps between the walls, but had come up empty.

Maybe Paul really was a genius. A mage.

Had I discovered everything? No notes, no mistakes?

Maybe the originals Jock wanted had never existed.

Maybe the comments carved into Paul's own memory were enough to handle any bug fixes or spec changes.

Out of ideas, all I could do was stare out the window like Paul had done.

The shed?

I glimpsed it in the corner of the garden.

The neighbors.

Paul had used that word.

He'd only ever showed strong emotion the one time I'd tried to open that shed.

I ran downstairs and tumbled into the garden.

I grabbed the shed door, shaking it violently.

Locked.

A combination lock.

Four discs that could be rotated from 0 to 9.

Any numbers that might have meaning?

"Yeah, not likely!"

I'd just have to work methodically from 0000 to 9999.

These locks had a simple pin with teeth on it. When lined up with the notches on the discs, the pin would move a little. To open this lock, you just had to start with the furthest dial, trying each digit until it moved.

It didn't take long, partially due to luck. The lock opened to a simple 0123 combination.

That said a lot about Paul.

At least he'd had enough sense to not just set the thing to 0000.

"I guess it's common sense to lock up what you want to keep hidden."

I tossed the lock aside and opened the door. The rusty hinges squealed.

Inside, a burst of sweltering air met me, along with a sweet scent and bright lights.

I saw green.

Potted plants, every one of them my height, filled the shed to the brim.

There was an array of lights as bright as the sun and a watering system. That explained the heat and humidity.

Long, pointy leaves like fingers on a hand reached out from the stalks, which were arranged in a familiar pattern.

“This is cannabis,” I said.

Had Paul been growing this massive quantity of cannabis?

Cannabis. Marijuana. A common drug often smoked to give one an intoxicating high.

That was Paul’s secret.

Programming required a great deal of concentration, especially for a genius like Paul who kept all the designs in his head. Of course he’d use a booster like cannabis.

But pot smoke had a very specific and recognizable scent, and I’d never smelled that in his flat.

Was he dealing it on the side?

“No, Paul had more than enough money.”

I’d handled his day-to-day affairs, including his finances. He must have known I was too timid to ever take advantage of him.

He was right, too. I hadn’t touched a dime of his money. I had no reason to rob him, and I had a conscience.

But then...what was this for?

Surrounded by the stifling scent of the cannabis and the heat of the lamps, I looked around the shed in a daze.

In the back, beyond the sea of green pot leaves, a flat stone had been placed on the floor. Remnants of burned cannabis lay on top of it.

Weirdly, someone had spread the ashes in rings.

A burn mark stood in the center, like a black stain on the floor.

A stain so black it resembled a hole in the rock.

I stared at it, feeling like I was peering into another world...

“Ugh. My head.”

I shook off the stupor and staggered out of the shed.

After taking several deep breaths of Edinburgh air, my head felt clearer.

I glanced back inside the shed.

It felt like the black stain was watching me.

To cut off its gaze, I softly closed the doors.

Should I tell Jock about this?

That was my first question once I was back in the flat.

If I reported it, Jock would make the evidence disappear. Even if his star programmer was a pothead, Paul’s programs remained legit.

At the very least, Jock would make it clear that Paul’s cannabis habit had nothing to do with our company.

Maybe the pot had something to do with his disappearance?

“No.”

I dismissed that possibility right away.

If Paul’d been caught in a deal gone bad, they’d never have left all that pot just sitting there.

Maybe they were keeping it as a production facility. Then again, if anyone suspicious regularly went into the shed or had contact with Paul, even someone as dense as me would have noticed.

I didn’t think the answer could be so easily hidden.

All I’d seen was a forest of cannabis plants and that weird black stain.

No notes or computers.

When I looked back at the computer screen, the rows of characters began to wriggle, almost like they were dancing.

My head was still in a fog.

Maybe the fumes in that place had gotten to me.

“I should take a nap.”

I went to the bedroom and lay down.

“Alan, you have no talent.”

Oh. *This* dream again.

“You should have quit years ago.”

Paul’s voice sounded like it came from a great distance away.

I was still lying down, unable to move. As if I were dead.

“You have no idea what I’m doing, do you?” Paul asked.

“I do. You’re writing programs.”

“No. I’m cultivating them. Cultivating...the trees.”

By trees, did he mean those cannabis plants?

Were *those* the key to Paul’s programming?

Abruptly, I felt that sensation again, like something touching me all over.

How long had I been asleep?

It was still light outside. I heard cars passing in the street.

I’d had that dream again.

It had felt more vivid than the last time. So had that *sensation*.

I looked around the room but saw nothing.

Maybe I was still under the influence of that cannabis.

“Gotta get back to work,” I muttered.

What had Paul been doing?

I’d taken a few interesting detours, but it seemed like the fastest route was just to plod through his code.

My head spun at the idea.

But Jock didn’t intend to put anything else on my plate.

He'd assigned me to take care of Paul because he'd decided I was too useless for anything else.

Everyone said I was nice and earnest, but when it came to work I was a poor communicator. That made people mad. It always took me forever to draw up documentation, and the result was never easy to follow.

It was sort of baffling that I hadn't just been fired. Really, they kept me around because they needed someone to take care of odd jobs like this. If our company were a great tree, I was a dangling twig primed to fall at any moment. But even I had my uses.

They could stick me with the work nobody else wanted.

"That's what I do now."

But if I wanted to keep my job, I had to get *this* job done.

I knew all of this, yet it didn't upset me.

This was the only place I had.

I felt far more comfortable in this old flat than I did at a nice office desk.

This flat was basically mine now.

I'd taken it over from the missing owner.

That was all.

"Mmm. Time to work."

I felt as if I had to say it aloud or I'd never do anything.

Forcing myself out of bed, I went to the living room. After I put on some coffee, I sat down at the computer.

"Gotta keep going..."

When I looked at the screen, my eyes froze.

"What. The..."

An open file displayed an unknown program.

Was I imagining things?

No...

I hadn't opened any new files.

I found myself looking over my shoulder.

Had Paul returned?

No, I was the only one here.

Had someone snuck in while I was in the shed?

Even if they had, what kind of intruder wrote a bunch of new code and then left?

"Agh!" I cried as something rubbed against my leg.

I looked under the desk, but there was nothing there.

"A rat?" I gulped, searching the room for any signs of movement.

But there was nothing alive in here.

Maybe I was just too unperceptive to pick up on it.

I checked every mousetrap in the room, but none of them had sprung.

Donk.

"Yikes!"

Something bumped against my leg.

But when I looked down, nothing was there.

I held my breath, listened closely...

I couldn't see anything.

I couldn't hear anything.

But...

Tap.

Something touched my arm.

No...

It was still touching me.

Lightly.

It felt like a small hand resting on my arm.

Then the thing started climbing from my elbow to my shoulder.

“Go away!” I shouted, trying to brush this invisible thing away.

My hand struck something, knocking it off.

Did it hit the wall? Roll across the floor? If it did, it didn’t make a sound.

But it was here.

I couldn’t see it, couldn’t hear it, I couldn’t even smell it.

Beep. The computer made a small electronic noise, the sound of a file opening.

Edit windows opened and closed. A chain of letters appeared in the edit window.

It was assembly language code. Efficient code. Just like the code Paul wrote...

“Who?” I whispered.

In the face of all this madness, I clung to the belief that *someone* was doing this.

Someone could easily remote desktop into a computer.

But I had accessed this computer with admin rights, and I knew it wasn’t set up to allow remote desktop.

The keys themselves weren’t moving, yet code spilled out in the edit window.

Code that looked like an experienced programmer had written it. There was nothing wasted, not even a typo.

Open and close. Open and close.

The number of files grew.

“What is it writing?”

This question crossed my mind at last.

Something I couldn’t see or hear was writing a program.

There was another beep, and at last the programming stopped.

Hesitantly, I moved over to the computer, waving my hand over the keys.

I didn't touch anything.

Whatever had been there was gone.

My knees buckled, and I collapsed to the floor.

"What the hell was that?" I gasped.

Mmm.

I couldn't begin to describe it.

I could touch it, but I couldn't see it.

But it *was* definitely here.

Whatever it was, it had written a program.

Paul, the genius programmer, the one we'd all called a mage, hadn't written his code. It had been that thing.

Whatever it was.

To borrow a term from the local folklore, maybe it was some sort of goblin?

Maybe a faerie? An elf?

Unlike Jock, I didn't know a lot about these things.

I didn't know the difference between a gnome and a faerie, but I knew this thing wasn't a normal part of our world.

Five minutes ago I would never have believed in something like this, but now I felt myself accepting it.

If I didn't, I'd go crazy.

Could the cannabis I'd inhaled be causing these hallucinations?

Wishful thinking. I could tell my mind was working just fine.

I could easily recite the names of the kings of England. I could say my parents' and grandparents' names. I think. I'd forgotten their birthdays, though.

I really needed to calm down.

What were these things?

No point in thinking about that.

What were they doing?

Writing programs. Exactly like the ones Paul wrote.

What had they done to me?

Not clear. They'd scared but hadn't harmed me.

I stared at the program the invisible faerie had written.

If Paul had always had them write his programs and pretended those programs were his...

If I did the same, maybe I could be the new Paul.

Though I wasn't sure if their program would work.

Then...

I pressed the call button on my phone.

"I'm in a meeting," Jock said.

"Jock. I found a new program Paul wrote."

"Really?"

See? Jock jumped on it.

"I'm gonna keep looking. Mind if I stay here a while?"

"Go ahead. That's what you should be doing. Looking forward to it," he said.

I grinned.

Now he needed me.

Without me, Jock had no way of getting Paul's...no, *their* programs.

Only I knew the secret.

Triumphant, I uploaded the program to the company servers.

"Alan, was there anything else? The other programmers are raving about this code," Jock said.

“I’ll look.”

“Need any help?”

“Er, no. If Paul comes back and there’s a crowd here, he’ll flip,” I said.

“What?”

“Sorry.”

“No, you might be right. Then it’s up to you.”

“Right. Thank you.”

Now I’d secured my position.

Paul was gone, but if *they* were here, even I could...

There was just one problem.

Paul must have had some method of instruction telling them what programs to code.

If the programs were useless, Jock would drop me back to “worthless” status in no time flat.

Still, this secret was a weapon.

I finally had a weapon to call my own.

I had to find the right way to use it, though.

There had to be a trick.

That night, I began testing how these invisible, inaudible faeries worked.

All I knew for sure was that they’d write programs for a few minutes at noon and at midnight. Twice a day, they’d finish off several pieces of code.

I also knew that they ate food.

I’d found small bite marks on food I’d bought for myself. They looked like human bites but only the size of my thumb. The teeth marks even appeared on things inside the fridge.

The faeries mostly seemed to go for cheese and fish, things high in animal proteins. I found insect bites on the vegetables but not *their* teeth.

I searched online for information about faeries, and the results suggested that I had some sort of brownie.

Brownies lived in homes and would take care of housework when the owners were away.

“Then let’s call them brownies. Welcome, brownies!”

I wasn’t sure if they’d reacted to me.

But when midnight rolled around, programs started writing themselves on the screen. I guessed the brownies were still doing Paul’s job for him.

If they worked even with me here, that must mean they didn’t accept me as their new master.

As long as the brownies did not accept me as their new master, they wouldn’t do anything more for me.

I had to figure out the secret to making the brownies my weapon...

I looked out the window again.

“That shed,” I murmured.

That weird burn, the black stain at the back.

That stain had bothered me.

I could understand there being a charred mark from burned cannabis, but the burns stood in rings around a black stain in the center.

And I’d felt like something terrifying lurked inside of it.

If that wasn’t my imagination...

I went down to the shed and stood before the burn marks.

I felt like the cannabis plants had grown since yesterday. I covered my face with a handkerchief so the overwhelming odor didn’t mess with my head again. Breathing as shallowly as possible, I wormed my way through the plants, plucked a few leaves, and arranged them on top of the burn marks.

“Something will have to happen,” I said.

I lit the cannabis on fire.

The uniquely sweet scent of burning weed filled the air, and I felt light-headed.

I shook my head, trying to stay focused.

I had to watch closely...

The change came soon enough.

A black bud was born from the center of that stain, but this bud didn't grow out of soil; it sprouted from rock.

I reached out and touched the bud lightly. It felt...slippery? I couldn't quite describe it.

Some sticky fluid coated my finger. A strand stretched between my fingertip and the bud.

"What...is this?"

I sniffed. It smelled like soil mixed with something rotting, so unpleasant I turned and threw up in the pot of a nearby planter.

Behind the puddle of vomit, something thin and white peered out from beneath the soil.

"What's that?"

I swallowed a few times, then brushed the soil away. Roots clustered around the white thing. I grabbed the stalk and yanked.

The roots came up, dislodging the earth around them and exposing what lay beneath.

"Bones," I whispered.

It was a tiny animal skeleton, probably a rat.

A small piece of paper fluttered into the pot from which I'd pulled the bones.

It had been buried in this humid room, so the ink had bled. It was illegible.

I looked around at the green stalks growing from the planters.

"All of them?" I muttered.

I grabbed another stem and pulled.

More bones.

Once again, the cannabis roots had clustered around a small animal skeleton and another piece of paper.

I pulled up stalk after stalk, discovering more bones in the roots of each.

When I'd found my twentieth little skeleton, I finally stopped.

Every plant here had to have them.

I didn't know how, but the cannabis plants were grown from these sacrificial animals. When their leaves burned...something happened.

Burning leaves granted the wishes written on these pieces of paper.

Perhaps this was how Paul told the brownies what sort of programs he needed...

I hurried back to the flat.

A new program had been written on the computer screen.

Burning the leaves of those cannabis plants had set the brownies to work.

They'd kept working in Paul's absence because the instructions were still active.

And I'd just overwritten them.

Each of those cannabis plants was a subroutine, a massive archive Paul had left behind.

If I gave the brownies a new sacrifice, my orders might reach them.

That way these programs would become mine, not Paul's.

"Worth a shot."

The next day, I had a stroke of luck; one of the mousetraps I'd baited had caught a rat, leaving it barely alive.

Without hesitation, I put the rat in a pot. As an experiment, I wrote HELLO WORLD on a piece of paper, instructing the brownies to write the most basic program. Then I buried a budding cannabis seed on top of it.

Now I just had to wait for something to happen.

The results appeared far faster than I'd expected.

The cannabis plant grew with unnatural speed. Three days after I'd planted it, it had grown as tall as the other plants.

I plucked a few leaves, arranged them in a circle on the rock, and lit them on fire.

The smell of burning cannabis went right to my head, but I didn't care.

At midnight that night, the computer screen displayed HELLO WORLD.

I'd activated my weapon.

I felt like King Arthur must have when he pulled Excalibur from that stone.

Riding that high, I called Jock.

"Jock, what sort of code are you looking for at the moment?" I asked.

Jock sounded a little surprised, but I told him I'd started to figure out the trick to Paul's programs. My lie worked.

He asked for code to make rendering faster and memory management more efficient.

I could never begin to make that myself, but the brownies could.

I trapped more rats and buried them with seeds and paper detailing my requests.

Then I waited.

Like Paul, I stared out at the shed and imagined how the cannabis would grow...

"Why doesn't it work? What am I doing wrong?"

I stared at the withered cannabis seed.

I'd planted the sacrifice, the paper with the request, and the budding seed just as I'd done before.

I pulled up the withered plant. The roots were strong, wrapped around the rat skeleton. I looked at the paper. Only the first few letters had blurred; the rest could be read as easily as when I'd buried it.

They'd accepted the sacrifice, but the request had not been processed.

"Was the sacrifice not large enough?"

I increased the number of traps, placing them not only in the flat but in the garden as well.

This paid off in spades. That night alone, I caught twice the total number of rats I'd caught so far.

I buried all the rats along with a new piece of paper and a fresh budding seed.

"It worked!"

Just as I'd hoped, this gamble had paid off.

The roots had dissolved the rats, leaving only the bones behind.

The instructions on the paper were completely illegible as well.

I plucked some cannabis leaves and began burning them again.

The bud poking its head out of the black stain grew visibly larger, far larger than it had for a single rat plant.

Increasing the volume of sacrifices made this grow faster. What would happen when it was fully grown?

Pondering this, I returned to the flat to find the new program code already on the screen.

Reading the code, I couldn't be sure if it would work or not. I just sent it off and waited for Jock's reply. Which came soon enough: everything had gone swimmingly.

I understood how the shed worked now, but that knowledge just raised more questions.

Like, what would even larger sacrifices do?

I remembered the cat that had once visited the garden.

"Oh. No way."

I raced down to the shed and pulled the stalk of a plant from a larger pot. There, I found a different skeleton, one too big to be a rat.

The hind leg showed signs of a break.

It was that fat cat.

It hadn't gone anywhere; Paul had sacrificed it.

To accomplish what?

I recalled the day I'd noticed the cat was missing. That same day, Paul had gotten a frantic phone call from Jock.

"There was a customization overhaul to match a change in hardware specs," I muttered, remembering.

After that phone call, the cat vanished.

That was the day...

"You have no talent."

That was the day Paul told me that.

"Don't worry, Paul. I may not have any talent, but I've got something to make up for that," I said.

If surpassing Paul only required a few sacrifices...

My phone rang.

"Yes, Jock?"

"Alan, we got a problem," he said.

"What? Lay it on me."

"New consumer platform specs have leaked. We want to match Paul's speed booster program to them. Think you can find that?"

"Big job. I'll take a look," I said.

"Thanks. We're counting on you."

I hung up the phone, wondering what I should sacrifice for this.

For a job this big, I didn't think even a cat would do. If a simple spec change had required a cat, something this massive would require far more complex programming.

I needed a sacrifice larger than a cat.

Maybe a dog?

Or a sheep?

No...

Something even bigger than that? A horse or a cow?

How would I ever get my hands on livestock?

I could probably arrange a dog, but I'd never seen any stray dogs around here. Probably why there were so many stray cats.

Something bigger...

Something this town was full of...

"Oh."

Of course. People.

I stared down at my own shadow.

But was a shed the right place to bury that kind of sacrifice?

I scanned the planters and noticed one in the corner that displayed a large amount of stalks.

"Uh oh," I whispered.

Had Paul already crossed that line?

But for what?

I pulled up one of the stalks.

Soil spilled to the floor as the roots came out. I inspected them...and saw a skeletal human hand.

"I knew it."

Paul had crossed a line no one should ever cross.

To gain his wish, he'd sacrificed whatever it would take.

I plucked a few cannabis leaves from the plant and arranged them in a circle.

I wanted to know what request had required a sacrifice of this scale.

It took quite a number of leaves.

I set them on fire, and the sickly scent hit me hard.

My head swam.

If I could figure this out, I'd know all of Paul's secrets: the cannabis in the shed, the sacrifices, his connection to the brownies.

You should have quit years ago, Paul's voice whispered in my head.

No. I was hearing things.

I was high on cannabis.

Really stoned, actually. I couldn't move a muscle.

Partly due to the cannabis but also partly from my own curiosity.

The last traces of sanity screamed at me.

Run!

"To hell with running."

I'd finally got my hands on a real weapon, and now I had to master it.

I had to wrest control of it from Paul.

I'd see this out, as I'm sure Paul would have.

The sticky black bud blossomed, growing so tall I had to crane my neck to look at it.

The bloom stretched and grew until the stalk bent beneath its weight and stared down at me.

"Paul."

I found myself saying his name.

Paul's face lay in the center of the open bloom.

As if awakening from slumber, his eyes opened to stare at me.

I tried to tear my gaze away, but I couldn't move. It was like my eyes were nailed to his face.

The Paul inside the flower spoke to me.

“Welcome, Alan,” he said.

I finally listened to that last trace of sanity.

Forcing my legs to move, I kicked the ground. I fell on my behind and thrashed my legs, managing to back away from flower Paul.

Then something brushed against my hand.

The invisible, inaudible brownies had arrived.

More and more of them touched my arms, my legs.

The brownies lifted me up, carrying me somewhere.

“No!” I yelled. But they didn’t listen.

As they carried me away, Paul said, “Now I can cross over. You’ll be cultivating this tree next.”

Cross over? Where?

Suddenly the brownies released me.

My body dropped.

I landed hard on my back. The force knocked the wind out of me, and my eyes filled with tears.

My vision blurring, I felt like I was trapped deep inside a tunnel.

Where was I?

Something began covering my body.

My hand grabbed...soil.

I was in a hole.

I was lying in a hole 50 centimeters deep.

I tried to calm my reeling mind, to analyze the situation. Panic would get me nowhere.

If I panicked...

Things I couldn’t see or hear kept piling dirt on top of me.

They were trying to bury me in this hole.

“Hey!” I shouted, but they kept working.

I tried to sit up, but I filled the hole perfectly. I couldn’t move.

The brownies piled more soil on top of me.

Dirt got in my mouth, flavorless and unpleasant.

I had to run, but the more I tried to struggle, the more the soil held on to me.

Paul’s words came back to me again.

“You should have quit years ago.”

He was right.

I should have admitted to Jock that I was useless.

Instead I’d gotten all puffed up. I’d pretended I could get results and had accomplished exactly nothing.

All I’d ever wanted was for somebody to tell me, “Thank you.”

But I’d never hear anyone say that now.

As I lay buried, I knew the truth: I was turning into one of the routines that guided this cannabis, the tree that controlled each of the subroutines.

The last thing I saw was Paul looking down at me.

He was no longer a flower.

It was the Paul I used to know.

He had a sticky gleam about him, much like a cannabis bud.

Maybe Paul himself had been that black bud.

“I *was* that bud,” he said, answering my query. “You were chosen as a sacrifice to replace my old body.”

Paul smiled down at me.

“Alan,” he said. “You are part of the tree now. You can never escape from the jungle I’ve created.”

No!

I tried to fight, but by now I was almost completely buried.

As soil covered the last of my head, Paul placed a sprouting seed beside me.

“Once you become a tree, you can travel to where the neighbors are.”

As he spoke, roots sprouted from my head and twined deep into my body.

I began to vanish wherever they touched, replaced with a new me, reborn as a cannabis plant.

I was becoming part of the program upon which the world ran...

From out of the night, a pair of dark eyes peered at the shed.

“Oh, well. I knew this would happen. He can’t say I didn’t warn him. It was a fascinating experiment. But someone’s bound to interrupt when this many people go missing. What a pain! I’d better collect before that happens...”

The voice, and its owner, vanished into the darkness.

The End



The Sun and the Dead Alchemist

Kiyomune Miwa

The sun was bright in my eyes.

“Blinding,” I muttered.

English sunshine in summer was surprisingly harsh. Even as far north as this, it felt like the light was stabbing me.

But as I spent nearly all of my time holed up in my underground room, this pain was a rare pleasure. My body didn’t allow me to enjoy the outdoors on a daily basis, but I could handle it from time to time.

How long had it been since I’d last stood under the sun?

Two months? Three? Or maybe it had been years, not months.

My memories were so imprecise.

One part of me felt like I hadn’t left my room in ages, but another part swore I’d climbed a mountain just a few days ago in order to perform a ritual.

Didn’t matter. Rather than be distracted by faulty memories, I decided to enjoy the scenery.

A field of green grasses and proud, colorful summer flowers bloomed before me, all bathed in sunlight.

This season was so full of life.

As far North as England was, summer was really the most bountiful time.

Though England was warmer than other northern countries, the winters were still brutally cold. When spring arrived, the country’s famous rains arrived with it. The weather could change on a moment’s notice. One minute it would be sunny, the next raining cats and dogs.

But in summer the storms abated, and nature sang with life.

Everything turned green, and the insects buzzed busily from flower to flower.

Alongside that parade of life, *they* danced to their heart’s content.

“.....”

Sensing their presence, I turned.

As I did, they noticed, reacting with revulsion and a hint of fear.

“Oh? Again?” one muttered.

“Yes. Looking at us.”

“No way! Eww.”

“I don’t like this smell! It stinks!”

Couldn’t blame them.

They—the faeries—saw me as an enemy.

I was used to this reception, but while I might not hold it against them, their reaction was never exactly pleasant.

“.....”

I focused on the hateful stares that surrounded me.

I felt the faeries flinch. The ratio of loathing and fear flipped.

“Iron Rust! Iron Rust is here!”

“Iron Rust!”

“Run! Iron Rust’ll turn you into jam and eat you!”

“Iron Rust smells like rotting mud!”

Scattering like newborn spiders, they rushed off.

Some of them convulsed and needed the other faeries to drag them away to safety.

Oh dear. Perhaps I’d put a bit too much force in that look.

I had the evil eye. A single glance from me could bring misfortune, which was decidedly inconvenient. To skirt around the problem, I never quite focused my eyes on anyone. But still...

Perhaps that had been a little childish of me.

“Not good. Shouldn’t disrupt their domain.”

I regretted it a little.

I might be scolded for it later.

Though I no longer needed to breathe, I gave a sigh. Sighing often straightened out my thoughts.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said.

If I got scolded, I got scolded.

For now, I needed to see *him*, the mage named Elias Ainsworth, and the girl he’d made his student and partner.

“May I ask your name?” the girl said.

I’d rung the doorbell, and she’d answered.

She was a slender child, with reddish hair like autumn leaves and eyes as green as those same leaves in summer.

Those who saw the world through ordinary eyes might think her frail, but I perceived her to have a strong will, a quiet resolve.

I smiled faintly.

Yes, this girl was definitely a sleigh beggy.

This girl could see things that weren’t human and loved them according to her nature. A rare being, she was able to befriend all of the natural world and harness its power as her own.

“.....”

I felt the urge rising and forced it back.

This was rough.

I’d thought I was ready for it, too...

“Um?” she asked, hesitantly. She gave a worried look.

My silence must have concerned her. Perhaps I looked like I’d suddenly taken ill. Based on her manner, she had not perceived my real nature.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, getting a hold of myself.

Then I saw a large black dog at her feet. The dog growled, already on guard against me.

A bodyguard? Didn't belong to Elias. Must be *her* familiar.

This familiar's aggressively protective stance delighted me. The girl was well guarded, safe unless she ran into something beyond the pale.

After all, this was clearly a Black Dog. I caught a whiff of a graveyard on it, meaning it was likely a Church Grim.

Church Grims were hounds that had once served the goddess of death. With such a pedigree, they feared little. The perfect watchdog, and this one seemed devoted to the girl. He would protect her to the bitter end, even if it cost him his life.

With that thought in mind, I smiled.

"That's a good familiar," I said.

At this, the black dog stopped growling. Instead, he seemed confused. The girl appeared equally at a loss, unsure how to respond.

Hmm. Perhaps she had not the best of social skills.

Or perhaps I was at fault, and my words inappropriate. I was hardly the social type myself.

For a moment we both stared, neither of us sure what to say.

What now?

As I pondered, the girl gave me an out. *Thank you.*

"Um, what brings you here?" she asked.

This was, honestly, a huge relief.

I couldn't imagine Elias would have taught her this grace, so it must have come naturally to her. I could tell from her tone she was trying to help.

Relaxing somewhat, I was finally able to state my business.

"Right, I should have said that first. I'm here to see Elias Ainsworth. Would you tell him that Iron Rust has arrived?"

With a clink, someone placed a cup of tea before me.

I sat in Elias's parlor. It was a lovely room, well looked after.

"Thank you," I said, addressing the female faerie.

I could feel the heat rising off the tea. Its fragrance indicated her skill had not declined in the least.

"It's been a while, silver lady. No changes, I assume?" I asked.

The silver lady nodded.

Her name was Silky. She was a house faerie, a type of brownie that took care of all the housework.

So both the tea's enticing scent and the parlor's pleasant feel were her doing.

It had once been her job to meet visitors at the door, but apparently the girl had taken on that role.

Unlike that girl and her black dog, the silver lady still didn't trust me. Perhaps she was on guard against my evil eye. She kept her eyes downcast so as not to meet my gaze.

Didn't blame her.

Hostility from faeries was like a chronic disease, something I just had to live with.

At least this one didn't bombard me with loathing, which made it easier to keep my temper.

If she'd genuinely disliked me, she would never have taken the time to make me a cup of tea. After all, I couldn't eat or drink the way others did. She might not trust me, but I was still welcome.

And that was enough.

But my next sensation, the feeling of being *watched*, was not so pleasant.

"Um, could you not do that?" I said, not even turning to face the problem.

With this kind of incivility, it was better not to feign humanity.

"Sorry."

As I'd hoped, the sleigh beggy readily apologized, sounding remorseful.

She entered the parlor as she spoke, bowing her head.

At this, I finally turned to face her.

"No, I understand. It's just that having my true form perceived happens to be rather painful for me. For that reason, I ask that you not look at me through *that*."

I pointed to the round stone hanging from her neck, the one with a hole in it.

This stone had been formed naturally and served to protect her. It held the flow of the river, the blessing of the sky, and the power of the earth within it. The stone divided the other side from this one and simultaneously linked them together.

In ancient China, they fashioned gemstones into this shape for use in rituals. They called the gems *bi*.

If you peered through the hole in the center, you could perceive the true form of something, no matter the disguise it wore in the real world. The girl's stone would definitely allow her to see through my illusions.

I imagined Elias had given it to her.

The natural power made it both easy to use and extremely effective.

"I'm like *them*. The ones you call neighbors? Same thing. Some of them just abhor being looked at. Perhaps you're so used to being seen that this is difficult to understand."

This girl was a sleigh beggy. By her very nature, inhuman things noticed her.

But normal humans were unable to see faeries. On occasion, and usually with the aid of tools or drugs, ordinary people might catch a glimpse of them. But when discovered, the faeries would often fly into a rage. The human who steals a glimpse may end up paying for it with their life.

But that rule didn't apply to a sleigh beggy.

Faeries viewed sleigh beggy as one of them. So if a sleigh beggy saw them, they would not get mad. Instead they would approach as friends, teeming with

curiosity.

Although to an unprepared human, their definition of “friend” could prove disastrous.

Likely, this girl was so accustomed to seeing non-human things that she was unprepared for the act of merely looking to provoke hostility or anger. Of course, hostility and anger were not the only dangers. Dangers of which I was sure she was fully aware.

Elias would almost certainly have taught her that first thing. He was pretty good in that department, at least...

The girl informed me that Elias was still in bed.

She had woken him, and he would be down as soon as he’d made himself ready.

I was aware that he was not a morning person, so this was expected.

“Will you keep me company until he arrives?” I asked.

The girl hesitated but then accepted my request. At first I’d thought her quite shy, but maybe that wasn’t the case. She was definitely not the most talkative.

But she was still far better company than Silky.

Silky was one of *them*, hostile to me. I could barely communicate with her at all, and the silver lady never spoke to begin with. Until Elias came downstairs, there would have been a long, awkward silence. I may be tactless and have no sense of time, but even I have my limits.

The first thing I asked for was the girl’s name.

Before she could answer, I held up a hand.

“Oh, hold on a second.”

I glanced at the silver lady. Already ahead of me, she placed a notebook on the table between the two of us.

“Let us avoid using sound in introductions. I deal in such magic, you see. I don’t want Elias scolding me for it later,” I said.

Names held power, especially the first time a person gave their name. That

defined them, decided the form that person took. I was skilled in magic that used names to control others, and Elias was well aware of my talents.

So I was making a show, demonstrating that I had no intention of placing her under my control.

It was a well-known fact that my magic would work on a sleigh beggy. This justified the extra caution.

Names define us.

Even without intending to control her, I wished to know what sort of being she was.

I told her to go ahead and use the kanji. She hesitated, glancing up at me. Hastily I shifted my focus, making sure our eyes did not meet. If the evil eye affected this girl, it would be extremely bad!

“So you *are* Japanese?” she asked, cautiously.

“I was born there. I return from time to time. What gave that away?”

“Um, your clothes...”

Only then did I remember that my outfit resembled kimono.

I had forgotten.

“Oh, that’s right. Sorry. My memories can be terribly vague.” A question occurred to me. “If I may ask, how do I appear to you?”

“Huh?”

This rattled her.

She spent some time searching for the right words. Perhaps she had learned that saying the wrong thing to beings like me could be costly. For those who deal with our side of the world, caution is a necessity.

I felt my opinion of her improving by the second.

“Um, you’re quite beautiful,” she stammered. “Black hair and pale skin...and red lips. Well-suited to the white kimono.”

As she spoke, she wrote her name in the notebook.

Chise Hatori.

Two kanji for the surname and two for the given name.

No clan name, no occupational name, no titles of that sort. Of course, they'd changed the law and done away with everything but family names.

"Hatori Chise...a bird that flaps its wings, and one who knows the world. Then your hair is less autumn leaves and more a bird's feathers."

In my mind's eye, a bird with red wings soared over a forest the same color as her eyes.

"A good name," I said.

"Thank you."

She seemed faintly embarrassed.

"I should return the favor. I am Iron Rust. An alchemist, I suppose."

"You suppose?" the girl asked. Good question.

"I never quite became a mage. I've dabbled in quite a few things. In that way—although I'm not sure it makes sense—I fall on the border of what an alchemist is."

This was true.

I had not become a mage. You couldn't become a mage simply because you wanted to be one.

Alchemists were different. In a sense, mages were born with talent, and alchemists became so through practice and technique. No amount of hard work could ever erase that difference.

We might look the same, and an ordinary human often perceived no functional difference, but the two jobs were unrelated.

Chise seemed to somewhat comprehend the difference but did not quite follow what I was saying.

I didn't blame her.

I might as well have said I was a whale that enjoyed flying.

“There are more beings than you think who dwell on the lines in between worlds. Wouldn’t you agree, Elias?”

I turned to the presence in the hall.

As if summoned, we heard his footsteps. The owner of the place, Elias Ainsworth, appeared in the parlor. He seemed a little put out.

“Been a while, Thorn,” I said, making a conscious decision to smile.

At a glance, it was difficult to glean any expression from his long animal skull of a head. Dressed like a gentleman, he had a presence like an ancient tree. In fact, he was a type of spirit, one that had lived for many years. At least, that was my understanding of him.

But for some reason he lived in proximity to humans. Not as a spirit, but as a mage.

Honestly, I didn’t understand him, but we had known each other for some time. As a hermit with precious few acquaintances, he had become one of the few people to whom I could talk.

“I do not believe enough time has passed to justify that phrasing, dead alchemist.”

He was in an even grumpier mood than I’d thought.

It seemed he suspected I had done something to the sleigh beggy girl.

“You don’t say? I never had much sense of time. You know that, Elias.”

Hoping to clear up the misconception, I spread my hands in an attempt to appear harmless. He would be aware of how much effort this took.

As if catching my intent, he gave me a long, evaluative stare. The suspicion did not entirely leave his eyes, but he did seem a tad inclined to believe me. With a sigh, he settled into the chair across from me.

“So what brings you here?” he asked.

“First, I offer a gift for your glad tidings.”

I waved a hand in the air and produced a box I had kept hidden on the back side of space. The silver lady saw the size of it and quietly cleared the tea cup.

Such an ideal housekeeper.

Once the table had been cleared, I set down the box. It was a clothes chest made from the princess tree, one I'd had specially designed.

"What is this?" he asked.

"I heard the news, Elias. You haven't had the wedding ceremony yet? That will never do."

I lifted the lid of the box.

Inside lay a bridal kimono so white it seemed to glow. In the country from which Chise and I originated, this garment was known as a shiromuku.

I could tell Chise was quite surprised by the sight of it. *Ha ha, well? Beautiful, isn't it?* I was quite proud of my work.

Elias stared at the kimono as if caught off-guard, so I pressed the point.

"All girls look forward to their weddings. You're duty-bound to make the occasion a memorable one."

Even he couldn't have predicted this.

He'd better be surprised. I'd spent a lot of time working on this.

Discerning expression on Elias's bony face was difficult. To be able to interpret his feelings at a glance required either years of practice or a genuine connection to him. The ability to read his moods was, in a sense, a particularity of those who do not see with their eyes.

As that thought crossed my mind, I realized Chise, who was seated next to him, also reacted to his mood. It seemed she, too, could tell he was surprised.

Ah ha. Apparently my skill was no longer so unique.

The mage's bond with his partner was already stronger than I'd anticipated. I continued my explanation.

"You recall that silkworms make for popular familiars in my field of magic? That's how I was able to weave the fabric using such top-class silk."

As his initial surprise wore off, Elias checked to see if the bridal gown housed any sort of alchemical trap. I did not blame him for his caution. After a few

moments, Elias sighed. He'd clearly determined there was no danger.

"I'm grateful for your generosity, but I can't accept this. We have our own thoughts on the matter. We would prefer you not involve yourself."

His surprise gone, Elias was grumpy again. I found it rather amusing.

"Ha ha, sorry to tease you like this. I just wanted to see the look on your face."

The glint in his eyes only grew steelier. Perhaps I had pushed things too far?

"This is a sample. Naturally, any couple must discuss what to wear to their wedding and choose what is best for them," I said.

I reached out into the back side of space once more. Producing introductions to a clothier and a tailor, I handed them to Chise.

Hesitantly, she accepted, holding the cards up for Elias to see as well. The mage looked them over and seemed to relax at last. "Well, I can trust them, at least," he muttered.

"So what actually brings you here?" Elias said, having sent Chise away.

"....."

"I know you genuinely did come to congratulate us, and to tease me. But there's another reason."

Whew. He was certainly clever. Saw right through me.

I let the expression on my face fade. I considered expressions fundamentally unnecessary. In fact, moving the muscles in my face required conscious effort. This rule of concentration applied to my entire body as well.

"Just checking," I replied.

"Checking what?"

His tone sharpened.

Clearly if this "check" would place him—or rather, that sleigh beggy girl—in danger, I would not get off lightly. This mage's destructive abilities were formidable.

I'd long since lost the capacity for fear, but I certainly couldn't afford a mistake.

At the same time, I felt that Elias was the one backed into a corner.

In the old days, he would never have threatened me so obviously. It seemed he was no longer that same person. He had changed.

"The sleigh beggy...that girl. I wanted to see how the two of you were getting along. How it differed from my own relationship."

"Iron Rust," he said, tensing.

"When you have someone you don't want to lose, human or not, that changes you. Don't worry. I have no intention of harming her."

"You may not now, but what about a moment from now? Can you even remember an hour ago?"

An hour ago? An hour...

I tried to remember. But my memories were hazy, and I wasn't sure in what order they went. An hour ago, I imagined I'd been headed here, but...

I may not have been able to remember an hour ago, but I recalled what happened before that. I had anticipated this question.

"I certainly don't remember an hour ago. That's why I obtained some insurance before coming."

I held up my right hand, showing him the thread wrapped around my finger. Enchanted silk, tinged green where the light caught it. One look at the silk and the knot, and Elias calmed down.

"You bound yourself so you could not harm us?" he asked.

"I don't trust myself any more than you do. Elias, you are right to be concerned. Once something important is lost, it cannot be recovered."

The silk wrapped around my finger was a binding spell I'd cast upon myself, one which prevented me from harming Elias or his family. Special thread tied in a special knot limited what I could do.

Naturally, I could never render myself completely powerless. If attacked, the

binding would be immediately released.

“Elias, I appreciate why you’re on guard. Judging from her reaction, you’ve already had several adverse encounters. And I admit, she is fascinating.”

I paused for a moment. My next sentence required some courage.

“As you know my true nature, it’s only natural you’d assume I had come to take her away. Or perhaps you fear I’m here to steal her life?”

“Indeed I am, Iron Rust. The only reason I did not cast you out immediately is because of Ruth’s demeanor. If he had shown even a trace of uncertainty, you would have been long gone.”

Ruth? Oh, the Black Dog. Certainly, he would have picked up on a threat to his master.

I found Elias’ explanation rather comforting.

Yes. This is how it should be, Elias.

If you love that sleigh beggy, that is how you should act.

“That’s correct, Thorn. I’ll admit it. I am jealous of you...of both of you. I might even hate you for it. You should be prepared,” I said.

“.....”

“But at the same time, I find myself hoping you can be happy. My desire to congratulate you is equally valid. Two opposing emotions clash within me. It seems I have not yet managed to completely escape the shackles of humanity.”

“If you say so.”

“That’s the long and short of it. You seem to be in a similar state of mind. Her presence has troubled you greatly, has it not?” I said.

“It has. Even now, I have much to consider. I’ve spent hours wondering what to do.”

“Then let me offer some advice. No matter what those around you say, prioritize your mutual happiness. Never let go of that. You may be separated from time to time, but never make a choice that will force you apart for good.”

“Iron Rust.”

“Don’t let it end for you like it did for me.”

Those words dredged up memories.

Don’t be like me.

Don’t lose your sleigh beggy the way I lost mine.

When I first met her, my memories were already hazy.

She—not Chise, a different one. My sleigh beggy. When had I met her?

Oh, right.

When England and Russia were at war over central Asia.

I was living in that part of the world then. An English diplomat had invited me to help ensure peaceful negotiations with the leader of a powerful local tribe, so I did what I could. I gave advice on what gifts to bring, explained local customs and manners, and, where needed, eliminated those who would interfere.

As a result, England gained an advantage over Russia.

As his way of thanking me, the diplomat brought me a sleigh beggy—her.

He knew a number of other alchemists back home and was well aware of their value. At the time, I’d needed a sleigh beggy to make up for my own shortcomings.

My memories are often unclear, but my memories of when I first met *her* are an exception.

She was like the sun. At the time, I had been living in a dark underground tunnel, yet it seemed she lit up her surroundings.

Skin pale as snow. Red lips. Hair black as ravens.

She was so very beautiful that I grew embarrassed, unable to say a word. I remember hastily retreating to my quarters.

Yet the very next day, showing no signs of fear, she came to wake me up.

I couldn’t believe it.

I was an alchemist. I had never even spoken to her. Yet here I was being dragged out of bed without the least bit of consideration. Before I could even grasp what was happening, I found myself seated at the table, food in front of me. "Let's eat together," she said.

I didn't understand.

I had already lost track of how long I'd been alive. I spared no consideration for human life at all. I was like a walking disaster, something capable of destroying a small settlement or two any time a bad mood struck.

And yet she treated me as she would anyone else.

This forced me to communicate with her properly.

"I can't eat what you eat," I said, and she smiled.

"So you *do* talk," she said.

I think.

I mean, I'm not sure, but I believe at that moment I had already begun to care for her.

In that dark underground room, seated at a table lit only by a single lamp, I genuinely felt like the world had grown brighter. I had never felt like that before.

And she wanted me to sit with her at the table, even though I couldn't eat normal food.

She said her name was Uruk. Said it meant "apricot."

She came from a land far to the north of where we were, in the mountains. She had many siblings and once tended a large flock of sheep with her parents. Before winter fell, they'd always thrown a festival for friends and family.

I said very little, but she spoke of herself at length, the words flowing like water through the karez.

And I listened to it all. I imagine I had fun just listening to her talk.

My greatest pleasure came from having her alive and at my side.

At the time, though, I hadn't understood that.

If I could meet my past self now, I'd have some choice words.

"You're in love," I'd say. "Think what you should do to avoid a tragic end."

But at the time, I was such a fool. I didn't understand a thing.

"Over here! The flowers are blooming!"

One day, she took me on a picnic, declaring I should get some sun.

To be truthful, neither of us knew the word "picnic" at the time.

But the diplomat who'd brought her to me had mentioned that picnics were a summer custom back home. Uruk had taken to the idea more than he'd ever suspected.

It was late spring; winter's chill had abated, and summer was fast approaching. It was the perfect day to go out. As accustomed to the underground as I'd become, the light of day was hardly welcoming. But Uruk wouldn't hear otherwise.

I folded first.

"Don't rush me! My body is not terribly strong."

I picked my way slowly along, while Uruk rushed ahead of me.

I saw flowers as medicinal ingredients, useless other than as a catalyst for magic. But flowers meant something more to her. Colorful flowers made her smile. She chased after the insects darting happily from flower to flower—and she chased *them* as they danced around the blooms.

Uruk was a sleigh beggy, and the local faeries welcomed her.

Some danced from flower to flower, and some rose up from the ground. Some flittered with the wind, and some lived between beams of light.

Every one of these played with her in their own way, and all seemed to enjoy themselves.

Until they saw me, and their manner changed.

"Iron Rust!"

"The dead alchemist!"

“The corpse stealer!”

“Spreading that foul scent!”

The wind, earth, flowers, and light all turned on me. They whispered protectively in her ear.

“You can’t be with that thing!”

“You’ll wind up dead, too!”

“Run before you get eaten up!”

“We’ll help! Come with us!”

One after another, they tried to tempt my sleigh beggy away from me.

Rage darkened everything in my vision.

They would try to steal her from me? Take her where my eyes could not reach?

Raising my voice, I attempted to use my power. But a quiet voice whispered in my ear.

“I’m not going anywhere! Nothing bad has happened to me.”

It was a gentle embrace of a voice.

My anger vanished on the spot. The tension they’d raised dissipated.

We all looked at her, surprised. None of us understood what she was saying. None of us knew why she would say that. Even now, I don’t believe I’d done anything to earn those words from her. Yet she spoke them.

One of the faeries recovered first.

“B-but...Iron Rust takes power from you. Doesn’t that hurt? Don’t you hate that?”

“Hmm. But that’s my job,” she said.

She put her fingers to her lips, tilted her head.

She accepted what I did to her as if it were normal.

Sleigh beggy collected magic power. Using certain techniques, alchemists

could do the same. However, these were mere techniques. Practices. Sleigh beggy achieved the same result unconsciously without any difficulty.

They functioned on a completely different level.

In principle, the magic an alchemist used carved away the alchemist's energy and life. Techniques to gather magic helped but not enough to overturn that core principle.

But the alchemist could use the magic power a sleigh beggy gathered. With such power, it became possible to perform spells far beyond what we could manage by ourselves.

An alchemist needed a sleigh beggy to surpass their limitations, so most alchemists wanted one. Naturally, sleigh beggy were incredibly hard to find.

Uruk was the first live sleigh beggy I had known. Even a dead one was valued for the sheer quantity of magic left behind. People would fight and kill to possess even a sleigh beggy's corpse.

It was pure luck that I'd been given Uruk.

With the political upheaval going on across Asia and Europe, there was no way to guarantee the sleigh beggy's safe passage. The diplomat had received dirty goods and needed to be rid of them before his superiors found out. And said diplomat owed me, afraid of what would happen if he didn't pay me back.

Had any one of these elements not been in place, I would never have gotten the girl.

But now that she was with me, Uruk was like a canteen filled to the brim with magical energy. I lapped that energy from her day and night, any time I needed it. It must have caused her pain beyond anything she'd ever experienced.

It was likely far worse than your average form of torture.

And yet.

She smiled and called it her job.

How astonishing this was, both to me and to them. I had previously wondered why she didn't seem to hate me for her suffering, and I continued to wonder even after this. Yet she displayed no hesitation at all.

I don't remember how we got home that day, but those events took root deep inside of me and remained.

"Do you want to become a mage?"

"A mage?"

This was winter, some time after she'd come to me.

Something had been preying on me for some time, and I was trying to explain it to her.

Sleigh beggy were rare beings, but rare things often led very short lives. Many sleigh beggy passed on before reaching the age of maturity. Even if they grew up, they did not grow old.

Perhaps some sleigh beggy led long lives, but I'd never heard of any.

But during a visit to India for some tools, I'd happened to meet a mage from northern Europe who was traveling the world. If what that mage had told me was true, then sleigh beggy had the talent to become mages themselves.

And if one became a mage, they would be able to escape the short life to which their power had doomed them. A mage could control the problematic parts of that power themselves.

The path to becoming a mage might bring difficulties, surprises, and troubles of its own, but it would clearly solve the biggest problem: impending death.

With Uruk's help, I had achieved a number of previously impossible things. The results before and after her arrival were like night and day. It felt like I'd accomplished a hundred years of work in these few short months.

I could no longer do without her.

Just the thought of losing her, of going back to the agonizingly slow method of research filled me with something rather like terror.

Of course, if she became a mage I could not use her as freely as I had. If I made use of her sleigh beggy powers while training her, it would hardly make for efficient proceedings.

But in the long run, teaching her would be to my advantage.

And at this point, I still had not achieved my real goal. Uruk simply would not last long enough for me to achieve it.

At the time, that's how I interpreted my motivations. Or perhaps I was simply trying to convince myself.

Either way, Uruk was a clever girl.

She asked if learning magic would interfere with her "work for me," providing magical energy.

"Yes, it will slow things down a little," I said.

"Then the way we have been doing things will be more useful to you."

"No, I thought about that, and I believe this way would be better. I've never mentioned this before, but I've always wanted to be a mage," I said.

Mages borrowed help from things that were not human, causing miracles. Alchemists studied the rules of the world and used techniques to create similar results.

They were similar but also very different. And I had always wanted to be a mage.

But no one could simply become a mage. Only those with the natural capacity could make that talent bloom. Those without such gifts could never bridge that divide.

But I was scrambling to overcome that barrier, even if I had to violate taboos.

"I imagine you've noticed this by now, but I am not alive. I am already dead," I said.

I exposed my own true form and nature to her. In hindsight, perhaps this wasn't necessary, but I did it anyway.

My true form was that of a horrible, shapeless monster. I resembled bubbling black mud, a cluster of obsession that had long since lost all form and simply floated there in that murk. The core of me had consumed the hearts, souls, and spirits of countless others. Eventually, I'd become an evil thing that no longer remembered its original appearance.

That was who I was.

“Mages create miracles with the help of those that are not human. I have learned arts that allow me to take the dead into myself, to merge with and use them as my arms and legs. I believed that doing so would allow me to become something like a mage, however false.”

But I had been wrong.

For all my conviction, ambition, wickedness, and desire, all I’d managed to do was turn myself into something inhuman: the dead alchemist.

Iron was the metal found in the land of the dead, and rust could kill even that iron.

That was I—Iron Rust.

“Uruk. If you become a mage, that might allow me to find a way to become a mage myself. Will you help me with this?” I asked.

“Okay. If this is what you need.”

She hesitated, but in the end she consented.

I would come to regret this exchange later.

I should have warned her that sleigh beggy led short lives. She would have accepted my request even with that knowledge, yet I feared even the slightest chance that she would leave me.

My feelings made no sense.

If I feared losing her, then why had I allowed her to know what I was? What would I have done if she’d been scared enough to run?

It took awhile to notice this inconsistency.

Only when I considered it did I realize the truth of my own heart.

Only then did I understand that I loved this girl, and however foolish such an impulse might be, I had wanted Uruk to accept my true nature.

When I first realized it was love, I was furious.

I was dead. I’d lost my flesh. I should no longer have been able to feel

nauseated, yet I did.

My current body was just a puppet, an appropriate corpse controlled and operated with magic. I needed sleep to process memories and maintain bodily functions but could eliminate everything else as I pleased.

If I did not wish to feel nauseated, I would not. In theory, at least.

But now I couldn't bring myself to eliminate the nausea. Or the anger.

I loathed my own vapidness, loathed the weakness that left me unable to face the truth.

If I told Uruk that sleigh beggars were doomed to short lives, would she leave me? There was almost no chance of it, yet that possibility so scared me that I hid the truth from someone I treasured.

And yet I wanted her to accept me? Accept me not as I appeared, but as my true self?

How stupid was I?

I was a complete fool! Of course I felt sick about it!

I'd never known I was this horrid! Transforming myself into a cluster of obsession was one thing, but love?

I'd forgotten that I was filth writhing in the earth's bowels. I'd let myself fall for that girl who smiled like the sun.

True, I was but a sad mass of evil thoughts. If I weren't, I would not have presumed to feel this way. I was as vulgar as I was pathetic. I was wretched.

But at the same time, even as I raged at myself I still could not tell her the truth.

I was scared.

So scared that my body, one that should never have trembled, shook like a leaf.

I couldn't.

I couldn't!

Not ever!

I couldn't bear the idea of losing her.

The very idea of her absence terrified me.

I was too scared to even imagine what might happen, to plan against it.

Naturally, there was no predicting the future.

Even ripples on the water's surface seemed like the premonition of hopelessness. I could not look at them. I feared I would glimpse a future without her dancing in the hearth's flames, so I dared not peek.

In my terror, I hid my love from her.

The harder I worked to conceal my feelings, the more frightened I became.

I convinced myself that if Uruk knew how deeply I loved her, it would drive her away.

Many times I imagined it would be better to kill and eat her than to remain so fearful.

I knew how to convert the dead into energy. Maintaining my own consciousness required regularly consuming the thoughts of a living human. I was far past feeling guilty about this.

And around us, tribes and countries warred bitterly. Countless people died every day. In a world filled with death, how could killing and eating someone be painful?

No.

I couldn't.

It was impossible. I didn't think I could bear a world without her in it.

I considered analyzing her personality, converting it to data that could be recreated within me whenever I pleased. But she was only herself as long as she lived in that body.

I loved more than her personality. Her soul, her spirit, her heart, her flesh...I loved them all.

Uruk as I knew her was a combination of these things.

I knew that. I recognized that knowledge.

Yet the urge to kill her returned again and again. Again and again, I thought better of it.

Tortured by my one-sided obsession, I was still, in my way, happy.

Even as I was overwhelmed by impossible love, she remained at my side and smiled for me.

Until...

Probably.

It was probably always impossible.

I was an alchemist. Just an alchemist.

Though we achieve similar results in our work, an alchemist is not a mage. An alchemist trying to train a mage was hubris of the highest order.

Perhaps I should have studied how to teach properly, gained the assistance of more mages and alchemists.

Or perhaps I could have sent her to the school for alchemists, far off as it was. Perhaps then we might have found a way.

But I feared someone else would steal her from me.

I feared that she would leave me when the slightest distance opened up between us.

Like a bird that had learned to fly, I feared she would be free to never return.

Uruk learned to use a few charms.

Taking advantage of her sleigh beggy connection to inhuman creatures, she even developed a few tricks that weren't based in alchemy. They were likely magic.

But we never achieved our ultimate goal of extending the sleigh beggy's short life.

She began eating less. Spent more time in bed.

She wasted away before my eyes and requested spirit medicine I would never have touched otherwise. I even tried medical techniques from the far East. These were effective in the short term, but we soon ran out.

I knew.

I knew there was nothing I could do.

Who could I ask for help?

Should I have released her long before this point?

It should have been enough to know she was alive and happy, even if she was happy with someone else.

As she lay there, breathing heavily, with me nursing her as best I could, I regretted everything.

But as much as I regretted it, I did not ask anyone for help.

Centuries of study.

Experience that had lasted beyond death itself.

Knowledge and magic power harnessed through killing and eating countless others.

All of that, and I was still powerless to save her life.

And yet...and yet even then I was selfish.

Because I loved her—just because I loved her—I tried to reach out and take that sun-like smile.

No, no,
no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no...

I was such a fool.

And yet.

As I lamented and suffered, unable to do anything...she smiled.

It was a weak smile, lacking her old strength. Still, she smiled at me and said, "Thank you."

And...

And those were her last words.

After that I believe I went mad for quite a while.

I have no memories of that time. I expect my consciousness wasn't human, but rather something closer to nature. I melted into the chaotic spirit's obsessions, capable of nothing but howls of madness.

The next thing I knew I'd abandoned my previous body and had found new flesh to inhabit.

Needless to say, it was *her* body.

The pale skin, red lips, and raven hair I'd admired for so long became my own flesh.

And in that body, in her brain...I found her memories.

These showed me things I had never known, things she had never told me. Her past. Her feelings.

"Oh, God..."

The words came unbidden.

Uruk's happy family no longer existed. An opposing clan backed by a powerful country had slaughtered them before her eyes.

Her father. Her mother. Her brothers and sisters. Her family. Her friends. Even her livestock.

Blood and fire and gunshots stole them all.

Orphaned, she'd survived by pure chance. If a slaver hadn't been passing through the area, she would likely not have survived long.

The slaver had sold the homeless girl to that diplomat, who had given her to me. He'd said to her, "If you do your job right, then this could become your home."

Only now did I understand what she'd meant by "job." Mine had been her last chance at a home.

"No..."

Her life with me had given her far more joy than I could ever have imagined. Ordinary days, her simple routine with me...to her, every one of these had been like a precious jewel.

And for good reason.

She'd known.

She'd known sleigh beggy lived short lives.

Before the diplomat had even bought her, an alchemist had recognized her ability and told her what she was. He'd told her how long sleigh beggy usually lived.

I have no idea what that alchemist's intention was, but when she learned the truth, she'd resolved to live without regrets.

How like her.

Of course she would react like that.

That's why she'd never feared me. She'd always been ready to die. And because of that, she'd always faced forward, treasuring each and every moment.

When we sat together at the table... When we saw the flowers... Chatting with me about nothing in particular...

All precious to her.

And...

"Please tell me this isn't true!"

She had loved me.

Not just any love, either. The same kind of love I had felt for her.

And of all things, she had realized that I was in love with her, too.

Until the bitter end, she'd waited with bated breath for me to tell her how I felt. That emotion was carved deep within her flesh.

"It's too late. It's all too late. What...what was I even doing?"

I'd been so selfish.

Frightened.

I had never even considered her feelings. I'd been so scared of a hypothetical loss that I had lost her for real.

If I was capable of feeling despair, I felt it then.

If I'd had but a little courage...

If I'd been but a little wiser...

If I'd just faced the truth.

Then maybe...

Then maybe she'd still be smiling at me.

We might still be sitting at that table together.

We might still be able to go outside and see the flowers together.

But I had lacked that courage. I was a fool. I had never faced the truth.

What was lost would never return.

I would never see her smile again.

This was my punishment, and it would be mine until the day I ceased to exist.

My tea had gone cold. I looked up at the mage's face, that long animal skull.

"I look in the mirror every morning. I see myself wearing her face, and I say, 'Good morning.' I whisper to the girl in the mirror that I love her, but she does not answer."

Elias would have to do better than I had done.

I had never told him of my failure, but he would have known the story.

That was the way of mages.

If they knew one thing, they knew everything.

I had never tried to hide my failure, and that was all he'd needed to know it.

To know what had happened, what had gone wrong, and what I should have done.

“I am an evil spirit, resentment roiling around a core of obsession. I had a name once, but the human who bore that name no longer exists. Memories from the time people addressed me by that name are hazy now. Memories of the people I’ve eaten or the ghosts I’ve swallowed are far more vivid.”

Memories of lives from times and places I had never lived sometimes came to me. Occasionally, I mistook them for my own life. Most people would have started worrying about their identity.

But that was just the fact of my existence.

To me, several hundred years ago was as vivid as yesterday. Time’s flow no longer held any meaning.

“So the time I spent with her was everything to me. I am the only remaining proof that she ever existed, and so I will continue to exist until the world ends. That is what I am.”

I looked down at the cold tea, which no longer gave off that pleasant aroma.

“That’s not true,” Elias said.

Mmm?

The mage’s flat denial drew my attention back to him.

“That’s not true, is it, Iron Rust? You’ve turned your back on the truth again.”

“.....”

I was at a loss for words. He was right.

I *had* turned my back on the truth.

There was a price for everything.

That’s all this was, a price.

I should have known that. With the truth laid bare before me, I was briefly silenced.

“Fair enough. Because I could not be happy, I want for someone else to be happy. I hope to take comfort in that. I am jealous as well, for the same reasons.”

Yes.

I envied Elias, who had a still-living Chise.

My girl no longer existed, but Elias's sleigh beggy lived happily with him.

I hoped their happiness would last forever, yet I envied it.

I wanted to see Elias cry when Chise died.

I wanted to see Chise cry when she realized she and Elias could never live together.

I wanted to believe that such heartache was the way of things.

If not, then why had my girl died? Why must I live, cursing the world from within the prison of my own failure?

Yet I wanted them to smile.

A sleigh beggy, just like mine, living with a mage who, like me, was not human.

"Even so, Elias. All the more so. As someone who failed, I do not want to see you make the same mistakes. That much I can say for sure. Your happiness lies beyond what you fear."

Have courage.

Don't fear happiness.

Unlike me, you still have the opportunity and the right.

"You're leaving?" she called as I left Elias' home and was nearly at his front gate.

It was Chise. The Black Dog stood by her feet.

"Yes. My business here is done."

I stared at the girl a moment.

Physically, they did not resemble each other, yet she reminded me of Uruk. Was it because they were both sleigh beggy? Or was it the color of their souls?

"Um, is something the matter?" she asked.

“No. Excuse me. I just remembered something from long ago. If you’ll forgive the question, are you happy?”

The girl was briefly silent before she answered.

Not silent because she was at a loss or due to hesitation.

This was resolve.

“Yes. I’m happy.”

“Good.”

They were similar.

“Goodbye. Be sure to invite me to the wedding.”

“Y-yes...”

This time her hesitation was born of embarrassment.

I turned my back and walked away.

Yes. Have a beautiful wedding.

Make me even more jealous. Make me curse you.

And I’ll celebrate with you.

I’ll wish for your happiness.

I’ll hope you two reach the place we never could.

Those feelings were not a lie.

The End



Jack the Flash and the Rainbow Egg (Part 1)

Yuu Godai

1

Can't say as I ever really liked staring down the barrel of a gun, especially one with some ugly man's face behind it.

Before he decided to squeeze that trigger, I moved the unseen part of me. A shiver ran down my spine. The wind swirled. The man blinked and shook his head in bemusement, as if I'd just tried to imitate a karate master from some kung fu movie. He clicked his tongue and tried to pull the trigger.

In that instant, a giant wave surged across the carpet beneath his feet.

A tree root rose from beneath the undulating ground, dragging smaller, whiskery roots behind it. The root wrapped the carpet around the struggling man like a lasso. A single bud grew from the massive root, and a single fresh leaf unfurled from it.

"What the hell?" the man said, his voice muffled by carpet and tree root. "Let me out!"

As if in response, the window shattered. A giant wolf jumped in and landed in a shower of glass. Its gray fur stood on end. Golden eyes glared at me. Its teeth were bared.

"You're late, Larry," I said. "Weren't you supposed to get here ahead of me and make sure these guys weren't trouble?"

"Got caught in traffic," the wolf mumbled. "And it took me a while to find a place to get undressed and hide my clothes. Didn't wanna walk back with my dick hanging out, did I?"

Ignoring him, I peeled back a corner of the carpet. The ugly man inside found himself nose to nose with a snarling gray wolf. He shrieked.

The man didn't seem to notice the young leaves swaying around him. Few

humans would. I snatched up his gun from where it'd fallen on the floor. Larry finally seemed to remember why he was here. Wrinkling his muzzle, he let out a growl that seemed to come from the bowels of hell.

"Oh God," the man wailed. "Keep that thing away from me!"

"Sure, but we'll need you to talk. Sit, Larry."

Larry grumbled, but he sat. The gun dangling from my fingertips, I stepped forward, dropping the bullets one by one in my wake.

"You're gonna answer my questions. First..."

The next day, I faced a different man in a different room in a nondescript building off Broadway. No guns this time, and this dude wasn't actively ugly. You could maybe describe him as a fatter Mel Gibson with the confidence to make that work. Either way, he wasn't my type. He took a drag of his cigarette as I counted the contents of the envelope and scowled at him.

"We agreed to \$200. This is \$150," I said.

"Expenses and compensation. Bit of this and that, Jack," he said, stretching.

Evan Dean. An alchemist. My business partner—at least, he seemed to think he was—and the guy who hooked me up with work. Officially, he advertised as a shabby civil lawyer. Made a show of chasing ambulances, but that wasn't his real job. He put out his foul cigarette, adding yet another butt to the mountain.

"First, you had to pay for the window Larry broke."

"Unavoidable. Blame the traffic jam on Houston Street. Larry's big on manners. He doesn't want to roll up to work naked. Even though no real New Yorker would bat an eye at a streaker."

"And then there's the ugly man with the gun," Dean said.

"I should be the one getting compensated there. There was no intel on that place having any watchdogs, especially armed ones. Forced me to use power I'd rather not use."

"And third, I had to pay to clear the evidence."

That shut me up. In modern cities everyone lives on top of one another, and

the power balance is delicate enough without throwing magic and alchemy into the equation. Alchemists (and everything else on the fantastical side of things) are woven tightly into that fabric.

We had to operate carefully, making sure normal people never found out magic was real. The web that monitored our interactions had threads everywhere. The power I'd used reflexively to accelerate nature was enough to send a vibration running up one of those threads. Removing the kind of giant tree root you only find in ancient forests from an ordinary room without anyone noticing had to be a hassle.

"Didn't have a choice," I said, weakly. "What, did you expect me to handle a gun empty-handed? Maybe alchemists all wear capes that reflect bullets, but I don't. I may be a changeling, but I can't just ignore those little lumps of lead."

"Well, be that as it may, money spent is money you don't get, Jacqueline."

"Call me Jacqueline again, and I'll knock your head off," I growled.

Dean fished for another cigarette before realizing he was out. With a shrug, he shoved the crumpled pack back in his jacket pocket.

"Got another job for you. You'll like this one. Vince will deliver the details later. Seems like it's a delicate matter. All I can tell you is what it pays."

"It better pay well," I said. He was getting on my last nerve.

Dean shook his head at my impatience and then made a show of opening his desk drawer and taking out a file. He slipped a photo out of it and held it up.

"Payment when the job's done. This is all I can show you now."

I'm sure I froze for a full minute. My eyes might well have jumped clean out of my skull like a goddamn cartoon character. A string of drool fell from my slackened jaw and hit the floor. I bet I was panting out loud.

"And it'll pay the usual fee," Dean said, thoroughly enjoying my reaction. He flipped that photo around his fingers like a trump card. "This is a bonus. And I promise it's real."

Finally able to move, I threw shame to the wind and snatched the photo out of Dean's hands, holding it right under my nose. I tried to speak, but the words

caught in my throat. I struggled to breathe.

“Not for sale. Only two hundred ever made. Signed by the author and the voice actors. Even features a sketch by the author,” Dean added. “This special booklet was only given to select staff when the movie first released in Japan. It’s got color illustrations never reprinted anywhere else. No copies were given to the public, and almost none have gone up for sale. And none of *those* were signed by the author or actors.”

Dean had finally found a fresh pack of cigarettes. He paused to light up.

“But I bet you know more about that than I do. So? You’ll do it?”

2

“**S**o you took the job, then?” Larry scoffed, lounging on the couch.

He was not in wolf form. Right now he was a teenage boy with rumpled brown hair that spilled over his collar. He wore a Yankees sweatshirt, and an open gaming magazine rested on his chest. Half-eaten chips and pizza covered the table before him, alongside a can of soda and a Switch. From his pinkish face to his freckles, he looked every bit the typical teenager—except for the two pointy wolf ears poking out of his tangled mass of hair.

I wasn’t listening to him. Larry glared reproachfully, but I continued to stare blissfully at the photo. How many times had I tried to get one of these—well, not *exactly* one of these, almost none of them had the signatures—at an event or online auction, only to see the price skyrocket beyond my means? All I could offer was drool, and I wasn’t good-hearted enough to be happy for whoever *did* get to waltz away with a special booklet for my beloved manga. A less principled alchemist

might have employed traditional or electronic spells to pilfer the objective, but I was also a faerie. I had to toe the moral line.

A faerie...

I looked to the corner of my home/office with longing and admiration. At the very top, in a corner carefully camouflaged so guests would not see it, sat the

altar of all that I cherished. A collection, gathered over the years, of Japanese manga and anime goods, DVDs, CDs, Blu-rays, figures, posters, key chains, stuffed animals, magazines, comics...and doujinshi. These occupied the seat of honor at the altar's heart—a row of thin booklets, the sight of which always prompted a forlorn sigh.

Someday I would save enough money to go to Japan, visit Comiket, and buy a trunk full of doujinshi. The few scant volumes I possessed came from online friends who'd given them to me after profusive begging on my part. Whenever I got my hands on one, I knew how Arthur's knights must have felt when they found the Holy Grail.

"Like, can't you just go to a comic convention over here? Like San Diego or Los Angeles. You go there on vacation all the time."

"Comic-Con and Comiket are totally different!" I said.

Larry groaned and hid his face behind the gaming magazine.

Comic book conventions were fun in their own right. There was lots of common ground between different types of fans. Marvel and DC Comics, Star Trek and Star Wars, LotR and D&D—I didn't hate any of those. Sometimes Japanese manga and anime companies would even have booths there. But that scant selection never satisfied me.

My heart belonged to Ariake, to Big Sight, with the same fervor the Crusaders had felt for Jerusalem. That massive Comiket hall was filled to the brim with doujinshi of every genre, of all kinds of series. You could take them all home with you—if only you had the money.

That was my problem. Money.

Faerie land has no manga, no anime, and certainly no doujinshi.

Faeries hadn't exactly taken to the internet. Only human alchemists and the youngest, most adventurous faeries had really tried it. Faerie gold couldn't purchase you anything online. Credit wasn't even any use. Amateur events like doujinshi booths were all cash only.

Real, hard cash that rustled between your fingers, marked with a government seal of approval. Without money, you couldn't buy a thing. If a human

wandered into Tír na nÓg, they might bring something back with them if they were lucky. But an honest faerie in the world of man couldn't buy a single thing without earning money.

This was why I worked in the human world, refusing to return home to the land of the faeries. Jack the Flash Detective Agency: "We move like lightning."

Things happened in this city related to the magical world, and we couldn't let ordinary humans find out about them. These were garden variety problems, the kinds of things that happened wherever a bunch of different creatures with different views gathered. In a city like this, with humans and non-humans crammed into the subway together like sardines, anything not part of regular human society often failed to get treated like a proper case.

That's where Jack the Flash came in. I could move swiftly between humans and fae, solving crime for a just reward. Alchemists preferred to stay out of trouble, but they also caused the vast majority of problems. So they needed a third party to settle things. A creature like me, who lived on the border between two worlds, functioned well as the neutral solution.

"Hello?" Someone tapped at the window. "Jack? You there?"

"Oh, Vince."

I opened the window. The warm breeze of New York in early summer rushed in. Dust and exhaust smoke and the crackling magical energy of May evenings all brushed past my cheeks. With a nighttime view of the Brooklyn Bridge behind him, a young centaur smiled back at me.

Our ancestors were mostly the adventurous sort of Goodfellows, having stowed away on explorers' vessels bound from the old world to the new, but Vince belonged to a bloodline that was old even by those standards. His ancestors hailed from ancient Greece and had scattered across the world, even landing on this new continent.

Vince's family had stopped trotting aimlessly about the faerie woods and found paths that carried them through human cities. They'd founded a post office servicing those on this side of the world. Some hard-headed sorts still rebuked them for this, but as far as I could tell, Vince paid their ilk no heed.

Whatever his clan had learned on the long road from Grecian forests to the walls of lower Manhattan, the results spoke for themselves. From his tanned skin that glistened as if oiled, to the bluish black hair of his horse's body, he was a sight to behold. Any horse lover would gaze in wonder at his wild power. It came from his great-great-grandmother on his mother's side, didn't it? The blood of the Great Mare Spirit of Wisconsin trickled down through his family tree.

He had thick black dreadlocks with bird feathers and silver beads woven into them. Nearly a dozen rings and studs pierced his ears, his pleasingly fleshy lips, and his broad nose. He wore a red bandana tied around his forehead. Tribal tattoos decorated his broad chest and sturdy arms, all very artistic. He wore several dozen necklaces of colorful beads around his neck. As if paying homage to his Greek heritage, he wore an antique coin on a string, one that displayed the image of a goddess in a chiton.

My office was on the eighth floor of a four-story building—what can I say, magical citizens have some unique architecture. Vince's hooves perched on a thin ledge, and he calmly sorted through the contents of the ancient leather bag slung over his shoulder.

"Um...this one...and this one...and this one, too. Wow, 'Confidential?' You get yourself mixed up in something, Jack?" he asked.

I just gave him a secretive smile. Behind me, Larry made a strange noise between a sneeze and a hiccup. I snapped my fingers. The potato chip bag exploded, blasting chips all over. Larry whined and jumped to his feet. Served him right.

"Try to stay away from anything too dangerous. I'm warning you. Special service, free of charge," he said.

"Thanks, Vince. I'll be careful. Keep up the good work."

"You, too."

Vince smiled broadly, slapped me on the back, and turned to go. I stuck my head out the window to watch the centaur gallop away, leaping across roofs and over walls. He seemed less like a horse and more like a serow adapted to the city.

I looked through the mail he'd given me and pulled one envelope. The envelope itself was an ordinary white but sealed with red wax. A crescent shape marked the wax, like a claw had been pressed against it. I took the silver paper knife from my desk and slid it under the seal.

The envelope opened. There was no letter inside. Not a single page. Instead, a single green leaf from a linden tree fluttered out.

The moment the leaf touched my desk, green light shot out of it.

Soon my room had been replaced with stones covered in moss and grass, the walls of peeling paint switched with ancient tree trunks. Wind whistled through the treetops. I smelled pure spring water, the rustling of the plains, far off birdsong, and...

"Protector of the Dragons' Aerie, Guardian of the Ancient Lives," I said, getting down on one knee and bowing my head. "From Northern lands, the witness to eternity; great and beloved sage and mage; shepherd to the dragons that embrace the green and their hatchlings—Echos."

"No need for such formality, Jack the Flash. Well met."

He raised a hand in greeting. At his prompting, I rose to my feet. This had been a genuine shock. No wonder Dean insisted I should receive the instructions directly. The water of the Dragons' Aerie in Iceland, one of the few remaining genuine, true mages from days of yore, the song of white flower himself: Lindel. For someone of his stature to contact me directly, this must be a very big deal indeed.

"I rarely sing these days. Just Lindel is plenty. Oh, your other half seems to be doing well!" he said.

This fellow must have been at least four or five hundred years old, but his appearance suggested a man still in his twenties, possibly even younger. But his eyes—somewhere between a pale moss green and a clear sky blue—possessed an unfathomable light unique to those who have lived a very long time. Holding his wand to one side, he sat upon a chair-shaped rock and wore an amused smirk.

He directed his smile at Larry, who came over to me while trying to get the

potato chip crumbs out of his hair. Larry muttered something under his breath, his wolf ears twitching. I reached behind him, and he yelped.

“Your tail is out! Come on, now!”

“No need to yank it!” he wailed, tears in his eyes as his ears lay flat.

Lindel chuckled, but then his expression grew grim.

“I’d love to catch up, but this is an emergency. Let’s get down to business. Did the agent tell you anything?” he asked.

“No. Just that the client would give us the details.”

“Mmm. For the best. The less information people have, the better.” Lindel nodded and put both hands on his wand, resting his chin on it. “A dragon egg has been stolen.”

3

“A dragon egg?” I said, frowning.

The few surviving dragons all lived in a valley under Lindel’s protection. New eggs and hatchlings weren’t unheard of, but an alchemist or anything else sneaking into that aerie and trying to steal one certainly was.

“Someone made it into the valley with you watching?”

“This happened where I could not reach,” Lindel sighed. He tapped the wand twice. “Deep in the mountains, where no men tread, a clutch of dragon eggs from a rare breed believed long extinct was discovered. Seven of them had been buried there and lain dormant for many years. I immediately arranged for them to be transported to the Dragons’ Aerie, but when they arrived, I discovered that one of their number had been replaced with a very convincing fake.”

I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck rising. Pulling off a heist like this was absolutely insane. Pilfering one of the dragons Lindel watched over from right under his nose?

“Naturally, I searched for it myself, but it seems the culprits had a falling out.

By the time I'd tracked them down, the egg had crossed the sea to your side."

"To New York?"

"That is its last known location."

I thought for a minute.

Dragon eggs—obviously—were no normal eggs. They were concentrated magic energy, like crystallized power. If something like that had been brought here, it would have been noticed. Anyone involved in that trade would've heard.

Which was odd.

"What does this egg look like? The size and color?"

"About the size of a robin's egg. The color...well, it's the color of a rainbow."

He sketched a little bow in the air.

"At a glance it looks like polished opal, a translucent white base with seven hues of light drifting and sparkling inside it."

"Sounds like the sort of thing a human thief would pocket without knowing what it was."

"I'm extremely afraid that's the case," he said, sighing. "The men I captured confessed that the one who betrayed them added a silver and platinum setting to hide the magical energy within. He intended to carry it with him disguised as precious jewelry. But he was so focused on hiding it from those who can detect its power that he failed to consider non-magical thieves."

Just what fate had Lindel prepared for the thieves he'd captured? Were they still suffering? I tried not to think about it.

"Sounds like an idiot," I said.

"You're telling me!" Lindel shook his head. "At any rate, things are too different in the new world for those of us from the old to operate. And the egg is likely in human hands, mistaken for jewelry. We must recover it quickly, without being discovered by any alchemists or—of course—humans. If it falls into the hands of someone with the right ambitions, it could be very dangerous

indeed.”

I nodded.

“Have you checked the auction house already? I heard recent rumors they put a sleigh beggy up for sale, and Thorn dropped a hefty sum for her. Is that true?”

“Mmm.” Lindel grinned. I wasn’t sure why. “True enough. One reason I didn’t want to poke them. Be that as it may, it seems nothing of the sort has turned up at the auction house. I believe we can trust them on that. The people who prepare the auction lists are professionals, and anything dragon related comes to me. And regardless of the number of well-disguised alchemists and mages who gather there, they’d never put up a dragon egg without someone noticing. I believe it is in the hands of someone who knows nothing of magic.”

“If it’s in the hands of someone who does?” I asked.

Lindel just smiled at me, saying not a word. I looked down at my shoes and then threw my hands up over my head.

“Okay, Okay, I got it. Jack the Flash, at lightning speed. We’ll jump right on it, resolve it just as fast without humans or alchemists noticing. That’s what you’re after, isn’t it?”

“So quick on the uptake! You deserve the name.”

Lindel nodded, satisfied. He rose to his feet, wand in hand. Dragon hatchlings gathered around, begging him to come play. He patted their heads and said, “I’ve sent the reward to your agent in human currency, as always. And I added a bonus to ensure you’d take the job. Was I right?”

Yes, he certainly was. “You were.”

“Good, glad to hear it. I’m counting on you. I hope you’ll have good news for me soon.”

He spun the sleeve of his robes, turned away from us, and followed the hatchlings.

As he did, the effect of his spell faded from the room. The moss-covered stones became desks and tables again, the same old decrepit office furniture. The grand forest gave way to plaster with the paint peeling off.

Larry seemed to be still under the spell; his eyes had turned gold and flaming. Everything from his waist down was wolf. I slapped him on the back of his head. He yelped and rubbed it, glaring at me.

“Why do you always have to hit me?”

“Because your transformation’s slipping,” I said.

On the desk lay the unsealed envelope and the single linden leaf. I picked the leaf up carefully, tucked it in the envelope, sealed it again, and placed it in the drawer. It had served its purpose, but this was a leaf from one of the Dragons’ Aerie’s linden trees sent by Lindel himself. It contained plenty of that place’s magic. There might be use for it someday.

“If you aren’t eating that pizza, stick it in the fridge. And clean up those chip crumbs! You spilled some soda there, so wipe it up! Don’t want the carpet getting sticky. I’ve gotta get ready for tomorrow, so quit playing that game and go to bed early. TV off! If you take a late-night walk, make sure everything’s locked up.”

Muttering about how he wasn’t a child, Larry started transferring the cold pizza to a plate. He’d forgotten to put his tail away again, but I let it go this time.

I sorted the rest of the mail. Electric and water bills (both for human society), receipt for the rent (from the alchemist landlord), dubious—for several reasons—junk mail (two for humans and three for the other side.) One bill made of woven dry grass and black feathers from the crows I’d hired to help with the investigation the other day. The little rock with mixed brown and black was a statement of protest from some earth spirits whose realm I’d entered on a previous investigation.

That’s just how the world of magic went sometimes.

I put the receipt and junk mail and the rest in the right mailboxes, made myself a cup of coffee, and holed up in my bedroom. Staring out the window at the headlights moving through Brooklyn, I sipped and savored my coffee. I could still hear Larry moving around in the office.

Larry. He was human. No, maybe not anymore. He and I had been switched,

and he'd been raised among the faeries. The magic of their land had changed him into something no longer human. Now he was half-human, half-wolf, and constantly shifting between the two.

Larry wasn't a werewolf. Werewolves were either born that way or became so as a result of a curse. Larry's condition had nothing to do with either. According to him, he was a human, a wolf, and a faerie.

The two of us had been switched at birth, so we should have been the same age. However, he clearly looked like a teenager, while I appeared to be in my mid-twenties. Time flowered differently in the land of the fae.

Once upon a time, human parents would have quickly dealt with a changeling, or the faerie parents would have come to take them home. But this was 21st century America. Changelings were a footnote in the pages of an anthropology textbook, and my actual faerie parents completely forgot that time flowed much faster here.

Faeries were not exactly time-conscious to begin with, and ten or twenty years could fly by while they were just taking a quick rest. Any faerie parents planning on dropping their kid in the human world really ought to be aware of this. And don't even get me started on why they'd bother swapping kids around in the first place.

I turned on my bedside lamp and powered up my laptop. I cleared the spam email (both human and other) into the trash and opened up the browser. Special order computers made by Magus Craft artificers could run circles around your average Apple or Dell. I entered one of several chat rooms I frequented. There were any number of message boards or social networks only those with magic power could access, a fact I'm sure would surprise regular humans.

Jack_the_F> Hey! Evening. Who's around?

Baron_Z> Yo, what's up, Jack? Haven't seen you in a while, what's going on?

Score! Exactly the individual I was hoping to find.

Jack_the_F> Glad you're here, Baron. I'm looking for something.

You hear any rumors about a super powerful item showing up over here? A jewel, probably a large opal. About the size of a robin egg. Should be set in something.

Baron_Z> Hmm, haven't heard anything like that. Hang on a minute, I'll look around. This something better off kept on the down low?

Jack_the_F> Please do.

Baron_Z> Gotcha.

The screen flashed. Baron had put a lock on the chat room. I relaxed and leaned against the wall. He had no corporeal form, so I always pictured him swimming like a dolphin through a vast sea of data.

Baron Zamedi. When the computer network was first born, some enterprising gremlins met in the unknown domain of the datasphere. The collective consciousness and fatalistic union born from that meeting gave birth to *them*.

The oldest among them (counted by decades, at the most) began calling themselves Voodoo loa out of respect for William Gibson, an author who'd "discovered" them in the form of a novel. The Baron was one of the oldest of these. Meanwhile, the real Voodoo loa turned a blind eye on the upstarts' impudence, for now. Thankfully. Like any gods, they were merciless and immense, and once angered, not easily placated.

The electric loa were a new species and so had few relations with alchemists (bound by ancient traditions) or mages (who resided in nature and the earth). But as information merchants, they could comb through all kinds of data, finding things faster and more accurately than anyone else. Data was their source of nourishment, and all information their arms and legs, the very air they breathed.

They were a potent source of information. Searching for rare info was all the reward they required, an invitation to a feast.

The screen blinked a few times, signaling that the Baron had returned.

Baron_Z> I had to dig real deep for this one. Is this it?

One side of the screen showed a beautiful necklace with a large, gorgeous opal set in it. The image quality was terrible; it had clearly been taken from a security camera. I zoomed out and saw a group of men in black suits and sunglasses standing shoulder to shoulder, looking down at the velvet box containing the necklace. Seemed they were in the middle of a deal.

Jack_the_F> Yeah, probably. Who are they?

Baron_Z> Richard Diefenbaker. CEO of Spectrum Industrial Corp.

Richard Diefenbaker...I rolled the name around in my mouth. I'd seen the name before in papers or heard it on the news. Wall Street big shot, huh?

Baron_Z> The rest are his bodyguards. The one with the box is Jeffrey Chandler.

Jack_the_F> Who's Jeffrey Chandler?

The cursor blinked a bit in uncertainty and then started moving again.

Baron_Z> Um, doesn't really seem to be anybody. The police have taken him in for parking violations and drunk driving, picked him up a few times for minor thefts but never charged him with anything. Your common thug, I guess. Like well-chewed gum to us.

Jack_the_F> So how does he have such a valuable looking jewel?

Baron_Z> That's what I'd like to know.

I thought for a minute.

Jack_the_F> Can you send me face shots on everyone there and data on their connections? An enlarged shot of the necklace, too.

Baron_Z> On it.

The email hit my inbox with a ding. It had a zip file attached, and the header winked at me before opening on its own. My desktop filled with images, text, spreadsheets, and other data.

Jack_the_F> Thanks, Baron. I've got a lot of work ahead of me, so if you'll excuse me!

Baron_Z> Let me know if you figure anything out. Enjoy!

Closing the laptop, I stretched. I considered going right to sleep but thought of one more thing I should probably do. I opened the closet door and pulled an empty bottle of aspirin out of a drawer inside. Removing the lid while walking to the window, I flung the bottle's contents toward the New York skyline.

"Flicker and flap, sneak and spin," I chanted. "Run, run, little feet. Turn, turn, tired tracks. Take the shadow roads, run to the edge of darkness. Follow, ask, seek and bring home the rumors of the dustbins, memories spoken by the dust of the town."

Black dust spilled from the bottle, swirled in the air, and gusted away on the wind. I watched it go, satisfied. It was ash made from burning rat whiskers combined with scrapings from old taxi tires. Rats and taxis knew every corner of this city like no one else.

I closed the window and was about to start changing when my smartphone (also an artificer's work) let out an ominous sound. Darth Vader's theme. I knew who that was without even glancing at the screen. I let my shirt fall back in place, sighed, took a deep breath, and answered.

"Hello, Mom," I said. "It's Jacqueline."

An hour later, thoroughly annoyed and exhausted, I was finally able to hang up. What the hell did the opening of a jogging-only racetrack in their suburb have to do with me? Certainly, where they lived you were more likely to get trampled by a stampeding group of joggers than run over by a car, but still. My mother—it goes without saying that this was my human one, the one who raised me. Faeries didn't generally use phones. Anyway, my mother had explained at great length how mental and physical health depended on regular cardio exercise, with a lengthy sidebar on traffic safety, but I had so many other things to worry about.

Why had my real faerie parents deposited me with these super positive, PC-obsessed, ditzy, flustered humans instead of a normal human with the good sense to shun a weird kid like me?

As a result, I couldn't bring myself to dislike the parents who'd raised me. No matter how many times I swore I was just going to hang up, every time Mom called, I ended up sitting and listening to her rattle on, even though I had set

her ring tone to Vader's theme.

Feeling depressed, I flicked through my playlists. I wasn't in the mood for Akiko Shikata or ALL PROJECT right now. Vocaloids and Hirosawa Susumu? Not quite right. I ended up switching to an internet radio station that specialized in oldies, put my phone down on the speaker cradle, and let the music play at low volume.

I changed clothes listening to Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" and lay down on the bed while Bob Dylan sang "Blowin' in the Wind." I started nodding off to the sweet refrain of Elvis Presley's "Can't Help Falling in Love," and by the time the Bee Gees started singing "How Deep Is Your Love," I was sound asleep.

4

I was born in a crossfire hurricane...

Mick Jagger's singing dragged me from slumber. The changeling child, Jumpin' Jack, the super cool Jumpin' Jack Flash. A lonely kid, I'd grown up with the constant echo of this song in my head.

I didn't know if I'd been born during a similar storm. Or, for that matter, why my faerie parents had switched me with a human child. But I'd been switched with baby Larry and spent twenty odd years in the human world without ever knowing I was really a faerie.

I wasn't super cool. Otaku girls were the bottom tier on school's social hierarchy. I wasn't bullied or anything—the other kids just avoided me. In hindsight, perhaps they instinctively knew I fundamentally wasn't like them. They treated me like I wasn't there, keeping contact to a minimum. I was fine with that. As long as they left me alone, I was free to get lost in a world of my own fantasies.

The sad tale of Jumpin' Jack, schooled with a strap right across his back—while my parents were super chill, ordinary, sensible people who never once used a strap. The very thought of raising hands against a child would make them quiver all over. At any rate, they respected my uniqueness, never forcing their introverted daughter to go out and play. I was very grateful for that. I was

at a loss as to how to handle Mom's constant babble about communing with my higher self, being a strong independent woman, revolutionary diets, and natural vitamin healing, but I soon realized that as long as I kept smiling and nodding, I could just think about whatever I wanted. My mother didn't really seem to care if I was listening or not.

I'd felt like this wasn't the real version of me. That there was another, better world, and that if I could only get back there, this awful version of me would vanish. I could be my true self, and my life would really matter. Every teenager feels like that at least once, but in my case it came true. One day a half-wolf, half-boy named Larry tapped at my window, introduced himself, and told me what I really was. A changeling. A faerie switched with a human.

Be careful what you wish for. Truer words were never spoken. All this time I'd wanted to be a different version of myself, not this scrawny, freckled, boring girl too scared to talk. My deep dive into Japanese anime and manga was fueled by a desire to be part of some world I had nothing to do with.

But I'd found out there *was* another world for me. I'd realized it the second I first met Larry. The moment I saw his gleaming golden eyes, those ears and tail, the fangs as he grinned and waved through my window I knew immediately, common sense be damned. I knew he was my brother—in a sense, my twin. A human and a faerie, switched at birth. Oh, God. The thing I'd read about and seen on TV and longed for was actually real.

But not everything about that other world was necessarily great. The faeries didn't exactly roll out the red carpet and confetti for the homecoming of someone they'd abandoned in the human world. They'd all glanced at me and then ignored me. My real parents didn't even bother to show up. I still didn't know their names or what they looked like.

Larry was the only person there that I knew. Manners I'd learned in human society didn't work in faerie land at all. I was a faerie, but I didn't know how to be anything but human. The only thing I really got out of my homecoming was the knowledge that the strange powers I'd had since I was a kid were faerie magic. However, that didn't mean I could easily learn how to be a faerie.

But I had to become something, and quickly. I couldn't bear being neither

human nor faerie, bouncing between the two identities like a jumping jack.

As a human, I'd had this vague idea that I'd go to college, get a job somewhere, maybe fall in love, get married, have a kid. But the second I knew I was a faerie any hopes for that path fell apart completely. I learned just how hard being abnormal was. Not that being normal was simple, but I was abnormal in two worlds at once.

To cope, I latched on to a childhood hero. Long before I discovered manga, I'd idolized Sherlock Holmes. Well, strictly speaking, Irene Adler, the one and only heroine who'd completely fooled the great detective, mocked him, and gone on her way. The one and only woman for him.

When I was a little older, I'd looked up to Vic Warshawski and Kinsey Millhone, tough, cool lady detectives who didn't bat an eye at the macho posturing around them. One of many reasons I appreciated my parents' firm belief in allowing their child's thirst for knowledge and freedom of thought. This allowed me to self-direct as I pleased.

I read any and all books I wanted to, cultivating the ideal heroine in my mind. When I realized I had to become something fast, I ransacked my memories and latched on to these. A tough, cool lady detective who walked the streets of a dirty town searching for the truth. A knight in shining high heels.

Pretty sweet.

I'd left home and rented a room in a corner of Manhattan, put out ads in both human and inhuman society, and worked my butt off to make connections. Eventually, work came my way. Not a lot of it, but I earned a reputation as I handled one job and then another.

With the help of a little suggestion, my parents believed I had a job at a small securities firm and were convinced my career was progressing satisfactorily. Their politically correct trust in their child was so unwavering that I sometimes thought they'd take it in stride even if they found out I was actually a faerie.

Jack the Flash moves like lightning.

Super cool.

As I opened my eyes, the Rolling Stones were giving way to The Beatles'

“Paperback Writer.”

Morning sunlight spilled across the floor. Rubbing my eyes, I sat up and stretched. The window’s glass rattled.

I got off the bed, stopped the radio, and opened the window. Sunlight and a gust of wind brought in a cloud of ash-colored dust. The dust swirled around me, rubbing against my shins before spreading out on the floor and forming letters.

laurawinfreyoffbroadwaydancersingeractress

Like a childish scribble, the letters barely lined up.

“Laura Winfrey,” I whispered. “OffBroadway. A dancer. Singer. Actress. This woman has something to do with the egg?”

The dust quickly spelled out new words.

manfatmannecklacegiveherforlove

“A fat man. He’s giving her the necklace as a present? Because he wants her to be his lover. Is this the man?”

I opened my laptop and showed them the picture of Richard Diefenbaker from the data the Baron had sent last night. The boss of the Spectrum Industrial Corp. The dust scurried again, writing yesyesyesyes across the floor and positively frothing with excitement.

“You know what this Laura Winfrey looks like?” I asked.

The dust formed a big picture of a woman, as good as any photograph. Vivid colors like a colorized film. Eccentrically styled hair that was almost white. Heavy makeup. Lips so dark red they looked almost blackened, sharp eyeliner, fake lashes so thick they shadowed her hazel eyes. I would have preferred to know what she looked like without all that makeup, but that was probably asking too much.

“Thanks, everyone. You can go back now.”

I opened the lid of the aspirin bottle. The rat whisker and taxi tire ash swirled, burbling happily, and were sucked back home. I’d placed a mix of cheese and gasoline in there last night as a reward. Nothing like a good meal and a nice rest

after a hard night's work.

"Larry!" I shouted, flinging open the office door.

Larry was sprawled out asleep on the couch and jumped to his feet. I knew it! He'd fallen asleep gaming again. His hair was all flattened down, with only the wolf ears sticking up.

"Time to work. Wash your face and get changed, little doggy. Jack the Flash is on the job!"

5

Normally, I was a big fan of offBroadway. I'd gone to see musicals like *Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Misérables*, *Chicago*, and *The Lion King*, some of which had been playing since before I was born. I'd always had a great time, but the sheer polished perfection of those could be suffocating. Sometimes you wanted to go to a small theater and get as emotionally worked up as the actors.

I wouldn't think of entering the place in front of me, even on one of those more emotional days. Though it appeared to have a decent number of seats, this place was less offBroadway and more Off Off Off Off times infinity Broadway.

Around us, tourists flocked to *Stomp* or the Blue Man Group, but here was this little air pocket, a place I would never have found if work hadn't demanded it.

The brightly lit sign was more lurid than enticing, better at annoying or rubbing you the wrong way than being uplifting. Large posters slathered all over the place did not soften that impression at all. The posters' photos displayed massive close ups of the actress's face. At the bottom was a title and slogan in a gothic font, stimulating in the same way a headache is.

I glanced them over and quickly decided not to bother reading them. They didn't seem to be high-class literary material. More the sort of flyer you'd see printed on neon paper, lettering done in magic marker or by some old printer that didn't spread the ink evenly, and then plastered around a slum in Detroit or whatever.

These posters teetered on the brink of something you'd see outside a strip club. The grinning face belonged to the woman the taxi rats had shown me: Laura Winfrey.

Her name was all over the place, dancing here and there, always in this red gothic font that reminded me of her awful lipstick. Not a single hint at what sort of show this was or why anyone would want to see it.

Heavy lipstick, mascara blotted onto her fake lashes, plaster white foundation, and way too much rouge. A frothy white feather stole wrapped around her neck. The overall impression was of some creepy death mask, possibly because you could tell her eyes weren't smiling in the slightest. I imagined a bleached skull flashing teeth through that frozen rictus smile. I shuddered.

The overall vibe here felt like one of those lawless New York 1970s alleys Robert De Niro walked down in *Taxi Driver*. This place didn't have the right to declare itself Broadway, no matter how Off.

The final nail in the so-called coffin were the theater doors—and I called this place a theater begrudgingly. A man in a black suit and sunglasses leaned against the doors.

I didn't even need to see the suspicious bulge in the side of his suit to know this guy wasn't theater staff or any kind of performer. Watching tourists laugh and get sucked into one theater or another, he jutted his massive square jaw, an angry-with-the-world scowl adorning his brow, an unlit cigarette clenched between his teeth.

"What now, Jack?" Larry said softly behind me. Wearing a Yankees cap over his wolf ears and a matching stadium jacket, he looked like any other rabid fanboy. He blew a pink bubblegum balloon, popped it, and said, "That bloke's not exactly screaming 'good citizen,' is he?"

"Bet there's another one around back. Looks like this Laura Winfrey's got some dangerous friends."

With that, I walked straight towards the theater.

"O-oi, Jack!" Larry hastily followed.

“Frontal charge,” I said, and hopped up the stairs. I mean, there were only two sandstone steps, so this wasn’t a challenge.

A few paces later, I faced the sunglasses dude. He pretended not to see me, fiddling with his cigarette filter like he was bored out of his mind.

“Hey!” I said, with a big smile. “What time does the show here start? I’d like to buy tickets.”

“It’s rented out today,” the man growled, as if I should be grateful he’d said that much. The cigarette continued to dangle from his lips.

“That’s a shame! What about tomorrow? The day after? A friend of mine said the show here was the best, and I simply had to see it for myself.”

“Place is rented out tomorrow and the day after.” The man tugged the sunglasses down and gave me a hard look. I could see a warped version of myself in those mirrored lenses.

“It’s always rented out,” he added, hammering the point home. Then he stood, and leaned in. “Get me, toots? I dunno what your friend said, but you’re at the wrong theater. Now be a good girl and run along. Call your friend and find out where you’re supposed to be. Or else.”

“Or else what?” I said, smiling innocently. “My friend said Laura Winfrey is the best actress around, and the opal necklace she wears is simply divine, a true feast for the eyes. She’s here, right?”

The word opal sure got a reaction out of him. Even with his piggy little eyes hidden, I could tell. His cheeks quivered, his mouth flapped a few times. The cigarette fell to the ground, and his giant paws reached for my neck.

Unfortunately for him, they missed. Without any interference, I simply walked right past him, leaving the sunglasses man rooted to the spot with his hands grabbing at nothing.

“Sorry, bro,” I said, stroking his cheek. I glanced down at the cigarette on the pavement. It jumped up into my hand, and I carefully placed it back between his lips.

“I have to meet the star of your show. I know you’re just doing your job, but

so am I. Forgive me!”

A massive entrance hall waited inside the doors he had been guarding. Faded posters and flyers lay plastered on top of one another, dangling like rows of dead butterflies. It looked like the tiny bar had gone unused for ages. There were barely any bottles left, and the only remaining glasses lay in pieces on the floor. The pleather stools were white with dust.

“Why not just turn invisible and walk past him?” Larry muttered as he followed me, glancing back at the frozen guard. Raised in the faerie kingdom, he was used to the simple approaches faeries took to problems and often viewed my way of doing things as too theatrical and inconvenient.

“Short conversations like that can often give us extra clues,” I said, shooting him a pitying look.

I stopped in the middle of the hall, looked around, and spied a small door behind the bar. Picking my way through the broken glass, I made my way over and opened it. A cloud of dust billowed outward, and I sneezed. Behind the door a dark hallway waited, one that was seemingly used to carry drinks and snacks to the backstage area.

“Also,” I added, “anybody who calls me ‘toots’ deserves a little retribution.”

I waved Larry in after me and closed the door behind us. As soon as the latch clicked, we heard someone fall down out front, followed by a bang like a Fourth of July firework. People started yelling, and a moment later we heard police sirens.

Passersby must have had quite a fright. That suspicious-looking gangster standing out front had suddenly jumped into the air, done an unsuccessful back flip, and then shrieked as something exploded inches from his face.

Hopefully he hadn’t mistaken the explosion for a gunshot and started waving his own piece around. There he was, bored out of his mind on guard duty, and the next thing he knew he was falling down the stairs, his cigarette bursting and scattering tobacco everywhere. I doubt he had any idea why.

Naturally, he would have no memories of the woman who’d stood right in front of him. Toots, my ass. *You should have been on guard against what this*

toots can do, bro.

“Jack, this place stinks.”

This was the third time Larry had whined about the smell. We were using faerie footsteps, so our passage didn't disturb the dust, but we couldn't do anything about the stench.

What bothered Larry wasn't the real-world stench so much as the human memories seeped into the building itself. Hope and despair; love, hatred, lust, and desperation. I wasn't oblivious to the odor, but that rotten stench always lingered around abandoned locations. For a half-wolf like Larry, it was undoubtedly pretty tough to bear.

“Just a little longer,” I whispered. “See? There's the exit.”

Holding his nose, Larry just gave a short whine in response. I hastened my pace.

An open hatch waited at the end of the bare concrete passage, through which drink orders could be placed. I pushed a pile of empty coffee cups and plates out of the way and went through, pulling Larry after me.

“Ugh, I thought I was done for,” he moaned.

In the new area, Larry took off his hat and shook his head. His wolf ears shook, too. For a moment I could see a giant wolf superimposed on him. Like his boy form, every hair stood on end as he shook himself clean.

“Sorry,” I said, rubbing his ears apologetically. “So? Any scents worth following?”

“Slave driver,” he grumbled but lifted his head and sniffed the air. His lips pursed, a hint of gold sweeping over his pale blue eyes. His pointy ears perked up, shifting directions like radar. “That way,” he said, pointing down the corridor.

A number of candle-shaped light bulbs dangled in the hallway, something that seemed really out of place considering how trashed it was upstairs. They didn't even match the drab linoleum and plaster walls of this corridor. Like the passage above, remnants of the people that had once bustled through here

were scattered everywhere like confetti. This time, though, there were signs that it was still in use.

I took a step in the direction indicated.

“What brings you here?”

An upside-down skeleton face dangled in front of me.

I jumped back, bumping into Larry, who yelped.

“Ah, do excuse me,” the skeleton said, still upside down as he pulled himself completely out of the ceiling. Without bending over, he did a 180-degree spin, planted his feet on the floor, and gave a dignified bow.

He was dressed as a 1920s gentleman, with a black frock coat, a starched-front pleated shirt, wide cuffs, and a narrow bow tie. Even the silk hat he doffed was in flawless condition. Everything save the wearer’s flesh had been perfectly preserved.

“It’s been quite some time since anyone came here who could see me. You seem rather different from the rough crowd that’s been stomping around like they own the place.”

“Yes, very different,” I said, recovering somewhat.

He was a ghost. Of course. Most theaters had at least one of these haunting the place. Ghosts were drawn to areas where crowds gathered to enjoy the drama of the theater or movies. They were little more than shadows of human passion. Some theaters had as many as a dozen ghosts wandering around back stage or through the seats, working as invisible staff.

“I’m Jack, and this is Larry. We’re changelings. I’m the faerie.”

“Well, well. Nice to meet you, Jack. Larry.” The gentleman skeleton nodded magnanimously and gingerly returned the silk hat to his head. “I don’t believe I’ve spoken with a lady here since October of 1918. I was busy putting a little spit polish on some Gilbert and Sullivan at the time. *Iolanthe*, I believe it was. Must meet the demands of the masses, you know. Work in the can-can or what not. Smashing, if I dare say so myself. It was a glorious time, you know. Oh, where are my manners? My name is Roderick Byrne.”

“Nice to meet you, Roderick. Or would you prefer Mr. Byrne?” I asked.

“Roderick will do just fine,” he said, waving bony hands reassuringly. The massive ruby set in the ring on his finger caught the light with a dull gleam. “I don’t suppose you’re here to finally rid me of these boisterous fools, are you? They have no respect for art, not the slightest notion of aesthetics. This theater’s collapse into disuse is a sad consequence of time’s inevitable decline. But if it must be used, then I would much rather it be used for something proper.”

“By boisterous fools, you mean like the guy in the black suit out front? He had a gun.”

“Heavens! I had no idea they were so unscrupulous.” Roderick wiped his brow with a groan. His exposed teeth rattled. “Protecting the safety of a theater is, of course, a necessity, but it will never do to go frightening the audience. I never once permitted such a performance.”

“Didn’t seem like a performance. The lobby was totally trashed, too,” I said.

“That is their doing, I’m afraid. Before them, the place was properly maintained.”

He shook his head in dismay. I suppose he would be upset. This seemed to be a very old and very particular ghost. He had been here long before the efforts to clean up New York began and had protected the theater through several owners and remodels.

“Those who can think of nothing better to do than destroy things out of boredom have no place setting foot in a palace of art. And they have no idea how to treat the actress.”

“Is she here?”

Larry lifted his nose, sniffed the air, and then nodded at me. The actress Roderick referred to was clearly the one we were here to see.

“If it was up to me, I’d handle things quite differently. Hmph!” He snorted indignantly, despite lacking a nose. “You see, actors are quite delicate creatures. The lady is not without talent, but even Sarah Bernhardt—no, particularly Sarah—could hardly produce her best work held captive like that.

They keep her locked up in the dressing area and its adjoining room. They won't ever let her see the light of day. Even the gayest of larks would lose their song treated like that!"

"She's a prisoner?"

"Their boss claims she's being protected, but..." Despite his lack of face, Roderick's brow appeared to furrow in concern. "Protected from what, I do not know. I believe she is in need of protection from these men more than anything. I serve the arts, but where I can, I serve the ladies, too. Even in my current form, I believe I have always treated the fairer sex with the respect they deserve. Men like these should not be allowed within ten yards of a lady."

"Would you mind helping this lady out, too? I'm afraid I'm not exactly the corset and bustle type," I proposed. "But we've been hired to locate a certain precious jewel. The man who's locked up this actress, Laura Winfrey, may have something to do with it. We'd like to discuss it with her. Can you take us to her?"

"I certainly can. I would be only too glad to help. Nay, honored!"

Roderick held his hand out to me. I hesitated a second, then realized he was expecting me to act like a lady. Somewhat awkwardly, I took the bone gentleman's hand. Satisfied, Roderick led me in the direction Larry had indicated.

6

"Assisting a lady on a secret mission!" Roderick said, his teeth chattering happily as he escorted me down the hall. "What a delight! Reminds me of one of my greatest hits. The heroine discovered a despicable nobleman selling out their homeland. She slid a dagger into her garter and snuck right through the nest of villains to get that information to her lover."

"Sounds great," I said. I was not wearing any garters. "Bet it ended with them catching all the scoundrels and sharing a passionate kiss."

"Naturally! How else? The masses crave a happy ending!" The bones in his skull rattled merrily. "Let us endeavor to bring about a happy ending to your

mission as well! Here we are!”

Roderick stopped before a door.

This door appeared to have been replaced. Like the candle-shaped light bulbs, it looked cheap, with a fake wood grain plastered on it. Larry in wolf form could easily knock it down. I could possibly do the same. I was somewhat taken aback, as I’d expected to find a guard like the one out front.

“There are these rumors about a ghost in this hall,” Roderick said, guessing my thoughts. “They never come here if they can help it.”

I didn’t need to ask who was responsible for that. I turned, took a half step into the faerie world, and knelt beside the door. Human eyes would not see us now. Running into another sunglasses dude in this hall would be trouble, especially if he saw me walking arm in arm with a skeleton.

The door was as flimsy as it looked. I could hear voices talking inside, a young woman and a man. If the woman was Laura Winfrey, who was the man? The big boss, Richard Diefenbaker? But the voice sounded a little too young to be a big shot CEO, and a little too timid.

“Shall we go in?” Roderick asked. He was in a very good mood; this situation clearly simulated his theatrical flair. He took my hand and gestured towards the door encouragingly. “I’m afraid I do not have the strength to open it myself.”

“Thanks, but don’t worry. Larry, can you keep watch? Let us know if anyone dangerous approaches.”

Larry nodded, a little out of it; he was sniffing the air, sorting through the odors. His wolf ears twitched this way and that like the parabola antenna on the roof of the Pentagon. Entirely caught up in his search for information. He was a bit like the electric spirits that way; when he was chasing something or following a scent, he tuned everything else out.

I made sure he’d hidden himself properly and then passed through the door. There were no anti-magic or anti-fae wards on it. Cheap doors were easy to walk through.

Roderick turned to mist and followed after me, once again taking skeletal form at my side. Keeping myself invisible to the room’s occupants, I looked

around.

The mismatched decor was even worse in here. It was a large basement room covered in tastelessly gaudy furniture that failed to disguise what this place was. A miniature opera chandelier covered in glass beads, a footstool of garish pink satin, a carpet so loud it made my eyes hurt, and a makeup stand, table, and couch that looked like they'd aimed for Rococo and ended up with white cake. The filthy concrete walls peeping out between it all just added insult to injury.

At the heart of it all was a petite blonde girl in a thin white nightgown, her head bowed. She cried softly. On the loud carpet, a young, kneeling man tried to comfort her.

His hair was spiked. He wore a T-shirt sporting a punk band's name and jeans with the knees torn out. I'd seen his face in Baron's photos. Um, pretty sure his name was Jeffrey Chandler. What was he doing here?

"Come on, Laura. Come with me," he pleaded, hand on the sobbing girl's shoulder.

"I won't. I can't!" Laura Winfrey said, looking up. She sniffed loudly. "I can't take one step outside this room. They'd catch me immediately. I don't have any clothes or shoes, just ridiculous stage costumes and no money."

Her mascara ran down her face. Her lipstick was peeling, her rouge blotted, and her pale skin clearly showed through the cracks in her foundation. It hurt to see. She was so young! Barely into her twenties.

Possibly not even twenty! This was not at all what I'd been expecting based on the image the taxi rats had brought home. They must have seen the posters out front, but right now the real Laura Winfrey was more like a lost child at a county fair than an actress.

"Until their boss gives up on me, I'm ruined. I'll be locked up in here, dancing and singing for him alone. And when he grows tired of me, he'll just put a bullet in my head and dump me in the Hudson River. But I have to at least live that long. I don't want you ending up like that, Jeffrey."

"That's why I have a boss of my own, now."

Jeffrey looked desperate. He was really young, too. It was painfully obvious he was trying to make himself look way older than he actually was. I was slightly mad at Baron for calling him well-chewed gum. He might be just an average thug, but the way he tried to comfort and help his sobbing girlfriend? That was real.

“I swear! That’s how I made it in here!” he said. “You won’t have to worry about money. Look at this!”

He took a small leather pouch out of the back pocket of his jeans. Opening it, he poured the contents into his hand.

Laura stopped sniveling, and her eyes widened. I’m sure mine did the same.

“My, my,” Roderick said, adjusting the brim of his hat. “In all my days I have never seen the like.”

“That’s...how did you...” Laura whispered.

Her hand shook as she reached out to him. Jeffrey took a firm hold of her tiny, manicured hand.

“I stole it...well, the boss gave it to me. Mmm.”

Even covered by two hands, the jewel’s light was undiminished. It was a rainbow-colored opal the size of a robin’s egg, surrounded by dozens of tiny diamonds.

The photograph hadn’t done the real thing justice. It didn’t even come close.

Beneath that smooth surface danced specks of fiery crimson, gold, azure, green, and colors I did not even have words to describe. A sleepy blue transparent light spread like a mist across the milk-colored base. This light seemed to spin around it, like it had wrapped itself in the flickering lights of the aurora.

The glimmer of the chandelier above paled in the face of this radiance. Nothing in this world could compete with the power and shine of a real dragon’s egg.

How had I not noticed it the moment I’d stepped inside? No, before I’d stepped through the door? That leather bag must have had a very powerful

magic dampener cast upon it.

My heart raced, my breathing was shallow. My body felt hot. My cheeks burned. I'd never seen a real dragon egg before and probably never would again. I couldn't help but be drawn to a powerful magic crystallization like this. Faeries like us were drawn to sources of magic like sleigh beggy, but while those sources were often as ephemeral as mead, dragon eggs were solid objects several thousand times more concentrated, purified by time eternal and bloodlines of yore.

Something like this really couldn't be let loose in human society.

"W-with this, we don't need to worry about money," Jeffrey said, stroking Laura's hand. "If we just sell one of these diamonds, we'll have enough money to run away together. Look at the size of this gem! If we sell that, we'd have enough to eat for a lifetime. Run to Guatemala or wherever, buy a big yacht and a house with a pool, and live together, just the two of us. We can buy a whole theater, just for you. I won't ever lock you away."

"That's a dream," Laura said, sobbing. "The boss would never let me go. He comes to see me every night. I don't know why, but he's got his hands on me and he won't let go. He stares at me, makes me sing and dance, and then just goes home all quiet. All those scary men with him, a whole row of them, at his beck and call... If I try to fight even a little, they might just kill me."

"I'll protect you. I will!" he said.

Laura was full on crying now. Jeffrey patted her back, desperate.

"I can do it when I put my mind to it. I won't mess up again. I won't mess up when it comes to you. I should have taken you away when that awful old man first set eyes on you. But you said there was a chance he'd make you into a star, so I thought if that's what you wanted... But seeing you treated like this, I can't just do nothing!"

"But, Jeffrey, it's too dangerous..."

"I'm a man, ain't I?"

Jeffrey thumped his chest, the mustard and ketchup stains on his punk band shirt somewhat undermining the gesture. His voice shook. His hands shook, too.

“What kinda man can’t protect a girl? I can do this. It’ll be fine. Just leave everything to me. I’ve got a boss of my own now. We can take care of some fat old man. Two or three or four of them!”

Jack!

Larry’s shout snapped me out of it. I’d been staring at the dragon egg, transfixed, and forgotten to watch my surroundings.

They’re coming! Lots of them, armed! 14...15...16...augh! What the hell is that? It’s like a supernova!

I swore at myself. Pricking up my ears, I could easily sense people coming, their rough footsteps stomping towards us from all directions. How had I not noticed sooner? There was no way magic this powerful wouldn’t get noticed the second it was exposed. Even someone with no power of their own would have to be really oblivious not to pick up on it.

I thought fast. The man outside had reacted instantly to the word opal. The sunglasses brigade’s boss had nabbed the egg at one point. Then it had been stolen, I assumed. By Jeffrey? No, I’d worry about that later. Based on that magic dampening bag, there was definitely an alchemist involved, but Jeffrey didn’t seem like an alchemist. I sensed no power from him. In Baron’s photo, Jeffrey had been holding a velvet box with the necklace in it, so at some point that had been switched out for the magic dampening bag—and where had he gotten that? His boss. Who was his boss?

Laura clapped her hands to her mouth and screamed.

Shouting angrily, the men broke down the door and poured in. Jeffrey just stood there with the jewel—the dragon egg—in his hand. He gaped, as if he couldn’t comprehend that he had guns pointed at him.

“Larry!” I shouted.

There was a furious growl, and several of the men jumped and swung around. A moment later, a massive gray wolf leapt on top of them, knocking them to the ground.

Screams sounded, along with several gunshots, but Larry was faster than any gun. He tackled one man after another, mowing them down before letting out a

howl that shook the earth itself.

Still with one foot in the faerie world, I reached out and grabbed Jeffrey's arm.

"Put the jewel away, you fool!" I said.

Jeffrey jumped like I'd slapped him and looked around.

"Wh-who... Is someone here?"

"Just put the damn necklace away! We need to get the hell out of here, fast!"

"B-but, Laura and I..."

"No time for that! Try again later! We're going!"

I dragged Jeffrey bodily over to this side of the veil.

"He disappeared!" one of the men roared.

Larry spun around, became a boy again, and ran over to my side. His clothes had gotten ripped when he transformed, so he was naked. He was still half-covered in wolf fur, though, and the hat had survived.

"I liked that jacket!" he said, glaring at me. "You'd better buy me a new one!"

"I'll expense it," I said.

"The wolf's gone, too!" one of the men cried.

"What's going on?"

They were starting to panic.

"Jeffrey!" Laura shrieked, hysterical. "Oh, Jeffrey! Jeffrey!"

"Get the girl! If she escapes, we're all dead!" one of them yelled.

"Call the boss!" another shouted.

"BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Laura fainted as a giant skeleton appeared in the center of the room, teeth chattering. Blue fires burned in its empty eye sockets, and its bony hands waved as if trying to grab everyone.

The gangsters let out a series of shrill screams. Several collapsed to the

ground, frozen in fear.

“Thanks, Roderick.” I shot him a wink as I pulled Jeffrey out of the room. “Can I leave the actress in your hands for now? I’m gonna go fetch a garter and a dagger.”

“Anytime, Lady Agent,” Roderick said.

The ghost turned those fiery eyes towards me and returned the wink. The dragon egg pulsed in my hand, so I slipped it back into its bag and shoved it in my pocket. I dragged Jeffrey out onto the street. I could still feel the egg, like embers from a late night fire.

To Be Continued

Author Biographies **Kore Yamazaki (manga artist)** MAIN WORKS: *The Ancient Magus' Bride* (Mag Garden), *Frau Faust* (Kodansha) “A story about one of my favorites, Hazel. There are all sorts of things hiding in the world living lives of their own.”

Makoto Sanda (novelist) MAIN WORKS: *Lord El-Melloi II Case Files* (Kadokawa Shoten), *Rental Magica* (Kadokawa Shoten) “When I first read the manga, my imagination got all fired up, wondering how these two forged their connection. I’m honored to get the chance to tell my version.”

Kairi Aotsuki (novelist) MAIN WORKS: *Yuurakucho Obake Dagashiya* (Square Enix), *Genso Koshoten de Coffee wo* (Kadokawa Shoten) “Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this anthology. I had a blast writing about an unusual inhuman and an unusual girl in a different corner of this world.”

Hikaru Sakurai (screenwriter, novelist) MAIN WORKS: *What a Beautiful Sanctuary* (Seikasha), *Fate/Prototype: Fragments of Sky Silver* (Kadokawa Shoten) “It’s an honor to take part in the world of a story I’ve enjoyed as a fan. Thank you. I look forward to the rest of the manga!”

Sakura Satou (novelist) MAIN WORKS: *Madou no Keifu* (Sogensha), *Madou no Fukuin* (Sogensha) “Thank you for inviting me to join this wonderful project. To anyone reading this—I hope you enjoyed it, and I hope you fell in love with these two.”

Jun’ichi Fujisaku (novelist) MAIN WORKS: *Blood#* (Mag Garden), *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* (Tokuma Shoten) “My contribution might be going in a very different direction from the worldview of the main series, but I did what I could to tie things to the shadowy side of that world. I admit, I’d love some brownies to do my work for me.”

Kiyomune Miwa (game designer, novelist, historian) MAIN WORKS: *Kabeneri of the Iron Fortress* (Mag Garden), *Ikai Senki Chaos Flare: Second Chapter* (Shinkigensha) “Congratulations on the publication of *The Ancient Magus’ Bride* short story anthology! It’s an honor to have a seat at this table. I was a fan of the series already and was overjoyed to take part. I hope you all enjoy it!”

Yuu Godai (novelist) MAIN WORKS: *Guin Saga* (Hayakawa), *Paracelsus no Musume* (Media Factory) “Hello, my name is Yuu Godai. Thank you for inviting me to take part in this delightful project. I had way too much fun...and ended up getting cut in half. I forgot my guiding principle (when a project is finished, it’ll be three times the expected number of pages.)”



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